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The Authorship of "The Imitation of Christ."

Sir Francis R. Cruise.

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WHO WAS THE AUTHOR

OF

"THE IMITATION OF CHRIST"?

THOMAS À KEMPIS.

WHO WAS THE AUTHOR

OF

"THE IMITATION OF CHRIST"?

BY

SIR FRANCIS RICHARD CRUISE, D.L.,

M.D. (UNIV., DUBLIN)

"Tot ou tard, tout se sçait"

LONDON

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PREFACE

JUST ten years ago I published an essay on Thomas à Kempis and *The Imitation of Christ.*[1] The notices which followed its appearance have led me to think that my humble work filled a want, and was likely to prove useful to dispel errors, and manifest the truth regarding the wondrous book itself and its gifted author. I venture in illustration to quote here the words of the *Saturday Review*, January 7, 1888: "The volume contains a summary of all that is, and probably all that ever will be known of the subject, excellently arranged, and in a convenient form."

The motive which originally led me to write was the desire to rescue à Kempis, one of the most remarkable ascetics of the Middle Ages, from the obscurity in which he rests, at all events for most people; to give some account of his life, and the surroundings amidst which it was spent; and to show the solid grounds upon which I rest my belief that (despite all vexatious controversy) he was in truth the author of *The Imitation.* Finally, I strove to bring my readers through the locali-

[1] *Thomas à Kempis.* By F. R. Cruise, M.D. Kegan Paul, Trench, & Co. London, 1887.

ties in which à Kempis spent his long holy life, and to give some account of his relics. This portion of the book is illustrated from photographs, nearly all of which were taken by myself on the various spots.

Two successive editors of the *Irish Ecclesiastical Record* have paid me the high compliment of asking me to reproduce, in a condensed form, the main portions of my original essay, in fashion suited for priests and others whose scant leisure disables them from mastering the more elaborate treatise, and this I have done in the numbers of that periodical dating from January to June, 1897. With full permission I now reproduce this epitome, and hope for its wide circulation under the auspices of the Catholic Truth Society.

I should observe that in certain points, especially regarding the manuscripts, I have brought the present essay up to date, a necessary step considering the additional knowledge which has come to light since 1887.

It is no small gratification to me to find that a wish and hope which I expressed in my earlier work have been accomplished, namely, the erection of a suitable monument to the great Monk of Agnetenberg, and the transfer of his relics to a fitting resting-place. This auspicious event took place at Zwolle, Holland, near to Mount St. Agnes, on the 10th of November, 1897.

Knowing, as I do well, the profound and widespread ignorance which obtains regarding the authorship of *The Imitation*, it is my intention, very shortly, to reproduce this essay in several European languages, so that those who seek the truth may easily find it.

DUBLIN, F. R. CRUISE
May, 1898.

Who was the Author of "The Imitation of Christ?"

As we know that the Holy Scripture came from God, Fontenelle did not outstep the truth when he designated *The Imitation of Christ* as the most beautiful book that ever came from the hand of man. Beyond doubt it most perfectly reflects the light which Jesus Christ brought down from heaven to earth, and truthfully portrays the highest Christian philosophy. When our Divine Saviour preached the Sermon on the Mount He held up as the characteristics of His followers—perfect humility, poverty of spirit, purity of heart, meekness, sorrow for sin, forgiveness of injuries, and peace and joy in the midst of tribulation and persecution. Where else do we find these doctrines so incisively and persuasively taught as in *The Imitation?* In this one book, as Dean Milman says, "was gathered and concentred all that was elevating, passionate, profoundly pious, in all the older mystics," and no one ever could resist its power, "its short quivering sentences, which went at once to the heart."

How, and why, it may be asked, was the author able to compass within the covers of this slender volume so much wisdom, such vast spiritual experience, poetry, and profound philosophy? Such is the question put by the late Brother Azarias, in his essay on "Culture of the

Spiritual Sense," wherein he gives us the most perfect and beautiful analysis of *The Imitation* ever written. Let me quote his reply:—

> Here is the secret of the magic influence wielded by the *Imitation.* Pick it up when or where we may, open it at any page we will, we always find something to suit our frame of mind. The author's genius has such complete control of the subject, and handles it with so firm a grasp, that in every sentence we find condensed the experience of ages. It is humanity, finding in this simple man an adequate mouthpiece for the utterance of its spiritual wants and soul-yearnings. And his expression is so full and adequate, because he regarded things in the white light of God's truth, and saw their nature and their worth clearly and distinctly, as divested of the hues and tints flung around them by passion and illusion.

Amongst the countless effects which the study of this wondrous volume is certain to produce, none is more natural than a longing to know something of its author. Just half a century ago I began to ask myself the question:—Who wrote this book, and what manner of man was he? Thenceforth I commenced to study the subject, and in 1887 I published the result of my researches. I can well understand that many feel as I did, especially those who, having spiritual charge of others, advise them to read *The Imitation.* In the hope of giving to such, in very brief and simple fashion, the information which cost me years of laborious research, I shall now endeavour to condense all essentials into the smallest possible space.

Those who wish to study the subject deeply, will, I think, find in my essay quoted all they need. I believe it is impossible for any unprejudiced reader to master

the evidence I have there produced without arriving at the conclusion that the authorship of *The Imitation of Christ* must be assigned to Thomas à Kempis, Canon Regular of St. Augustine, who lived and died in the monastery of Mount St. Agnes, near Zwolle, in Holland. When I use the term authorship I should explain the exact limits within which I believe it applies to à Kempis. It seems evident that he was not the sole or original author in the ordinary sense of the word. On the other hand, it is equally manifest that he was the skilled collector, compiler, and arranger of the book, which, when studied to the bottom, proves to be an epitome or hand-book, embodying especially the teaching of the Holy Scripture, St. Bernard, and the writers and inspirers of the school of Windesheim, to which latter we shall allude presently.

Before proceeding to consider and analyze the strange controversy which formerly existed as to the authorship of *The Imitation*, it will be desirable to give a brief outline of the life and surroundings of Thomas à Kempis, the man towards whom all existing evidence points. In fact this course is necessary, because it opens up the history of the school of Windesheim, the cradle of the book in question, and of which à Kempis was pre-eminently the literary exponent. I may observe that I think it better to omit, as far as possible, in this essay, references to the various authorities from whom I quote. They may be found *in extenso* in my former work, and all interested in the subject can satisfy themselves, as I have done, of their accuracy and fulness. So far as I am aware, not a single one has been challenged or found erroneous.

Let us now look back into the years preceding the fifteenth century. Strange and troubled were those times, and fraught with scandal and confusion. Human ambition and the curses of wealth and worldliness had eaten their way, so far as God permitted, into the very fold of Christ. Prosperity had done its worst. What persecution had failed to do luxury bade fair to accomplish. To a considerable extent the morals of the people, and even of the clergy, from the highest to the lowest, were deeply corrupted, and the Church appeared in urgent danger. The Council of Lyons, summoned by Pope Gregory X., A.D. 1274, succeeded in adjusting for the time the schism of the Greeks, and peace reigned until the death of Michael Palaeologus, Emperor of Constantinople. Then the heresy broke forth again, and has never since been extinguished.

Amidst the confusion and disorder thus inaugurated, a still more scandalous revolt arose to harass and lay waste the Church of God—the Papal schism—the great schism of the West. An internal convulsion now shook the house of God. Rival popes struggled for the Chair of Peter. Christendom was bewildered, nations doubted whom they should obey, and the unity of faith seemed in peril. Never since the days of Julian the Apostate uprose a crisis so terrible or so dangerous. Still, above all came the promise of God, that He would be with His Church all days, even to the consummation of the world. Hence neither persecution, heresy, nor laxity ever shook the faith, because, as St. Bernard tells us: "The generation of Christians can never come to an end; neither can faith perish from the earth, nor charity from within the Church."

Just about this time a great religious movement commenced in Germany and the adjacent Low Countries. Holy men, gifted mystics of earnest faith and saintly lives, began to teach, and so impressively to inculcate their doctrines, that the people, hitherto steeped in worldliness, and neglectful of all religious obligations, turned a willing ear, and came back in vast crowds to their spiritual allegiance. Pre-eminent amongst these great leaders I may point out John Tauler, of Strasburg, Suso, Ruysbroeck, and Henry de Kalcar.

The mention of the last name leads us directly to his illustrious convert, a most remarkable man, the model of a true reformer, some account of whose career and work must necessarily preface our study of à Kempis and *The Imitation*. This man was Gerard Groot, often surnamed The Great. The most reliable account we have of his life is from the pen of Thomas à Kempis. From this memoir, from his *Chronicle of Mount St. Agnes*, and from John Busch's *Chronicle of Windesheim*, I shall extract an outline.

The venerable Gerard Groot was born in Deventer, in Holland, about the year of our Lord 1340. His parents were people of wealth and good position, much honoured and distinguished in their country; and they watched with tender solicitude over the education of their son. While still a youth, but fifteen years old, Gerard was sent for the completion of his education to the schools of Paris. Whilst there, if he surpassed his comrades in luxury and extravagance, he steadily kept in view the motive which led him thither; namely, to make rapid progress in his studies. As yet the glory of God was not the main object of his thoughts: he pursued the

shadow of a great name, and sought to gain renown amongst men. Very early, while only in his eighteenth year, after the ordinary course of study, genius helping the aspirations of his ambition, Gerard took his degree of Master. Raised to this position, and combining brilliant intellectual powers with a taste for the pomps and vanities of the world, rich benefices were heaped upon him, amongst others a Canonry at Aix-la-Chapelle, another at Utrecht.

Behold him now fairly set forth on the broad path of life, his heart as yet untouched by Heaven's voice. But a great and merciful change awaited this gifted man—the call to an exalted sanctity and heavenly mission. This call and conversion came to pass through the instrumentality of Henry de Kalcar, already named, a saintly Carthusian, who lived in the Monastery of Monichuisen, near Arnheim. De Kalcar had known Gerard as a student, and hearing of his absorption in worldliness, determined to seek him out and reason with him. All this is told in à Kempis's *Life of Groot*, together with his submission, and long retreat at Monichuisen, where he gave himself up to prayer, and the study of the Scriptures, and of the fathers of the Church, especially St. Augustine and St. Bernard.

Later it was thought well that Gerard Groot should go forth to preach the Gospel, which he did with extraordinary eloquence and success, making converts by thousands. After a time, owing to some misunderstanding with the authorities, through no fault of his, he was interdicted from preaching, and, yielding without a murmur, returned to Deventer.

Out of evil good will often come. Debarred from

preaching in public, Gerard occupied himself in consoling and exhorting communities and individuals, and devoted special care to superintending the work of scholars engaged in transcribing the Holy Scriptures and books of theology and piety, an employment of great importance and emolument in those days before the invention of the art of printing. Being settled once more in his native city of Deventer, he drew around him a number of exemplary men, both of the priesthood and laity, many of whom had been converted by his eloquent preaching. Living together in a species of community, they were soon joined by others, of various rank and education—persons of ample means, scholars, copyists, and even artisans of skill in different handicrafts, all willingly renouncing the world and its attractions to embrace a life of mortification and sanctity. In order that holy women, aspiring to perfection, might not be excluded from participation in the good work, Gerard founded a convent adjoining his own house, where those who entered followed a similar life, and carried out various industries suited to their sex and capabilities.

It appears that Florentius Radewyn, an illustrious and beloved disciple of Gerard Groot, took a very active part in the formation of this community, and was entrusted from the beginning with its care and organization. In fact, Busch tells us that it was Florentius who proposed to Gerard the idea of forming into a community the clerics and aspirants by whom they were surrounded. Groot was at first averse to the project, fearing the opposition of the mendicant orders; but he finally yielded to the solicitations of his disciple.

Under the direction of these two holy men, Gerard

and Florentius, was thus originated the society subsequently known as "The Congregation of Common Life," and at that time called "The Modern Devotion." The leading idea which bound together these earnest seekers after holiness, was an endeavour to return to the Christian life of the apostolic age. All lived in community, in poverty, chastity, and perfect obedience to their superiors; all worked for the common good, and contributed their earnings to the general fund, spending any spare time in prayer, pious reading, works of charity, and almsgiving. "And the multitude of believers had but one heart and one soul. For neither was there any one needy among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them, and brought the price of the things they had sold, and laid it down before the feet of the Apostles."

This "Congregation of Common Life" grew apace; but still one important detail remained to be accomplished. Gerard knew that to make the institution a lasting success it would be necessary to place it under some definite spiritual guidance. About this time he was led, mainly by a visit he made to the celebrated mystic John Ruysbroeck, at the Convent of the Canons Regular of St. Augustine, at Groenendaal in Brabant, to select that Order for the spiritual direction of the new community. Returning to Deventer he resumed his labours, in the intervals of which he matured his plans concerning the new undertaking. Many difficulties had to be overcome, many details to be arranged and perfected, amidst all of which Florentius was the ever-faithful helper and confidant.

Meanwhile God had ordained that the holy Master

should not see the fulfilment of his heart's desire, but that he should be called to his reward in the midst of his work. In those days the plague raged in Holland, and Gerard was stricken, catching the fatal infection from a friend whom he attended. He called around him his faithful disciples, spoke words of consolation and advice, confiding them and the "New Devotion" to Florentius Radewyn. He then quietly sank, and died on the 20th of August, 1384, the feast day of his favourite St. Bernard.

Of Florentius Radewyn, his successor, it may be truly said that he realized the words which our Divine Lord addressed to His disciples when He bade them follow Him in the lowly path which leads to the eternal kingdom, "Take up My yoke upon you, and learn of Me, because I am meek and humble of heart; and you shall find rest to your souls." This holy man was born in the year 1350, at Leyderdam, near Utrecht. His father was a man of high reputation and independent means, and sent his son, while quite a youth, to Prague, the seat of a far-famed university. Gifted with rare intelligence, Florentius made rapid progress, and soon became distinguished in every branch of science. Having completed his studies and taken his degree as Master, he returned to his native city. Pure of heart, and irreproachable in his life, he entered the Church and became a Canon of St. Peter's, at Utrecht. Ere long, however, God mercifully withdrew him from the temptations to which he was exposed, and, inspiring him with an ardent longing for holiness, led him to enter the ways of perfection.

Gerard Groot preached constantly in the Church of

our Blessed Lady at Deventer, and Florentius often went to hear him. The inspired words of the great apostle sank deeply into his heart; a burning desire to renounce the world and devote himself entirely to God took possession of his mind. From a Master of Science he became a follower of Christ, saying with the Psalmist, "O how great is the multitude of Thy sweetness, O Lord, which Thou hast hidden for them that fear Thee!" "My sheep hear My voice; and I know them, and they follow Me." Florentius had been Canon of St. Peter's, at Utrecht. After a time he resigned this prebend to become a simple curate at Deventer, in order that he might be near to Gerard, in whose work he was enlisted, and by whose teaching and example he desired to profit.

It is impossible just now to follow in detail the career of Florentius Radewyn. I must not, however, omit a brief sketch of the crowning work of his life—the foundation of the monastery of Windesheim. Gerard Groot, when on his death-bed, exhorted his disciples to put their trust in God, to persevere in their good work, to submit themselves entirely to the guidance of Florentius, to place the newly-formed congregation under the spiritual guidance of the Canons Regular of St. Augustine, and to build a monastery for its accommodation. For some time this project was in contemplation, preliminary steps were taken, various localities visited and inspected; but it was not until the year of our Lord 1386, two years after the death of Gerard, that a commencement was actually made. Meanwhile the approval of Florentius Wevelichoven, Bishop of Utrecht, had been sought and gained. The spot ultimately

chosen was a fertile tract, hitherto uncultivated, situated some twenty miles north of Deventer, and about four miles to the south-east of Zwolle. This valuable estate was the property of Berthold ten Have, a rich youth of Zwolle, who was converted by Gerard Groot, and generously offered it as a site for the new institution. To supplement his munificence Henry Wilsen, of Kampen, and his brother James, men of wealth and position, added a large endowment.

In 1386, under the direction of Florentius Radewyn, a chosen band of six intrepid holy men set forth from Deventer to take possession, to commence the clearing of the woods, and the building of the new monastery, which was destined ere long to work such marvels in the vineyard of Christ, and to extend so salutary an influence over Holland, Belgium, and Germany. The locality, called Windesem (now Windesheim), was held in great reverence, and believed to have been sanctified by the visits of angels. Within a marvellously short time the grand design of Gerard may be said to have been accomplished. Windesheim had fairly set forth upon its magnificent career, and commenced to spread around its beneficial influence.

Fascinating though the task would be, the needful brevity of this sketch obliges me to omit the history of the rapid and stupendous growth of the new monastery, likewise all details of the sanctity and devotedness of its inhabitants, the speed with which it absorbed, as the mother house, all the Augustinian monasteries of the adjacent countries, until it numbered as its affiliated children between seventy and eighty religious houses of men and women. Any one who

desires to study the subject will find ample details in Busch's *Chronicle of Windesheim*, Book I., from chapter xii. to xlvii. I shall only touch upon one feature of this glorious institution—namely, the character of the teaching of its spiritual school. I deplore my incompetency for this task, which I attempt solely because it is indispensable for the full comprehension of much that I shall have to bring forward later.

Let us recall, for a few moments, the thoughts which filled the minds of Gerard Groot and Florentius Radewyn when they inaugurated the Congregation of Common Life. In the first place, it was designed that its members should endeavour, from their hearts, to return to the life of the early Christians; to such a life as the Apostles led when following our Lord Jesus Christ on earth, and which they and their companions carried out after His ascent into heaven. All were to live in common, to work for the general good, to hold their worldly possessions in community, and to spend their leisure hours in prayer and works of charity. This grand idea of returning to the apostolic life constituted the tie which held together the earliest members of the little band of scholars congregated under the guidance of Gerard and Florentius. The necessities of those times, before the invention of the art of printing, rendered the work of transcribing books a leading occupation, and one both needful and profitable. From it, moreover, arose a class of scholars whose minds became saturated with the teaching of those whose works they copied, and leavened with their sanctity.

Keeping this in mind, a little study enables us to understand the tone of the spiritual school of Windes-

heim, and to trace its source and development. Groot was a man of exceptional sanctity, ability, and erudition. Before he commenced his missionary life he had devoted himself, especially during his retreat at Monichuisen, to the study of the Holy Scriptures and of the fathers of the Church. In his famous protest against the edict which suspended him from the right to preach in public he tells us the sources of the doctrine he taught. Not alone had he mastered the Sacred Word of God, but he had also familiarized himself with the interpretations of all the great teachers of the Church—Ambrose, Gregory, Augustine, Jerome, Chrysostom, Dionysius, Bernard, Bede, Isidore, Hugo, and Richard. Their works, as he tells us, were his chosen riches on earth.

Such was the inheritance of the school of Windesheim. It is certain that it never strove to promulgate its teaching beyond its own circle, which was natural enough for those whose motto lay in the words of St. Augustine, "*Ama nesciri*," "Love to be unknown"; nevertheless it is impossible to study the works it has left without observing that *The Imitation* is largely drawn, word for word, and sentence for sentence, from its writers, and that in truth the book found its cradle in Windesheim. That it did so is the inevitable conviction of all who have studied the subject profoundly without bias or prejudice.

I will now endeavour to give an outline of the career of Thomas à Kempis, the Windesheimer towards whom all existing evidence points clearly as the author of *The Imitation*.

While the great religious movement which I have

attempted to portray was in process of development, while Gerard Groot was evangelizing Holland by his preaching, and with the aid of Florentius Radewyn was bringing into existence the holy confraternity which culminated in the formation of the Congregation of Common Life, and the founding of Windesheim, a child was born in the far east of Rhineland who was destined to occupy a foremost place in the mighty work of regeneration, and to bequeath to posterity a book and a name undying in the history of Christendom. This child was Thomas à Kempis.

In the wide expanse of country between the Rhine and Meuse, not very far from Dusseldorf, lies a small town named Kempen, in the diocese of Cologne, and in it there lived in those days a pious couple, John Haemerken and his wife Gertrude. Not amongst the ranks of the nobility or gentry, but in the lowliest path of life, this worthy pair earned their bread by the sweat of labour, and reared their children in poverty, and in the fear and love of God. John Haemerken was a simple artisan, and his wife no higher in rank than himself. So far as we can ascertain he was probably an artificer in metal, an industry specially cultivated in Kempen from time immemorial to the present day. The word Haemerken, or Haemerlein, as it is sometimes written, means in German "a little hammer," and very likely, after the custom of those simple times, indicated his calling. In the well-known Latin editions of Thomas's works the name is translated into "Malleolus."

Tradition tells us that Gertrude kept a school for little children. If we may take the progress of her

sons in holiness as an index of her solid piety, it must have been great indeed. History is clear respecting two sons of this worthy pair—John, born about the year 1365; and Thomas, who first saw the light about the year 1380. A faint rumour alludes to another son, Gobelinus,—probably older than Thomas, who, like his brothers, gave himself to the service of God, and lived and died in the odour of sanctity in the monastery of Mount St. Jerome, at Hulsbergen. John, the eldest son, had gone from Kempen to Deventer before the time when we have any information concerning Thomas, and there joined the Brotherhood of Common Life. Thomas, born as we have stated about 1380, remained under the care and tuition of his parents, aided by the teaching of the grammar school of Kempen, until he was thirteen years of age. Then he too betook himself to Deventer to join his elder brother. Deventer, it should be remembered, besides the attractions it possessed for him from being the headquarters of the Congregation of Common Life, amongst whom John à Kempis was enrolled, was in those days a noted centre of learning in Holland, and was much more accessible to the inhabitants of the adjacent countries than Paris or the German universities.

Let us glance at the map, and think how the little youth—child, indeed—made the long and arduous journey from Kempen to Deventer. History tells us nothing of that pilgrimage, for such it must have been—how much he travelled by land, how much by the Rhine; but assuredly all can sympathize with the good parents in the anguish they must have felt in parting with their boy as he set forth alone upon

the wide world. So tender in years and poor in all worldly resources, the child needed an earnest faith in Providence. His good parents had taught him to trust in Heaven, and that confidence was not in vain. Certain it is, from his own account, that to Deventer Thomas came, and sought his brother John. Disappointment awaited the youth. John had gone from Deventer, and was then at Windesheim, full twenty miles away. To Windesheim he journeyed, and was tenderly received by his elder brother. Fortified with an introduction from him to Florentius Radewyn he returned to Deventer. He tells us how kindly that holy man received him, and all he did to provide for his immediate wants. John à Kempis was already a brilliant light amongst the congregation of Windesheim, and doubtless his recommendation obtained for his youthful brother a favourable reception, enhanced by the intelligence and fine disposition of the boy.

Scanty as the materials of our information about Thomas à Kempis are up to this epoch, from thenceforth they are far otherwise. It is impossible to read his works attentively without finding ample details which indicate step by step his subsequent career. The difficulty lies rather in the selection of the most salient and interesting points. To begin, let us see the impression made upon the youthful aspirant by the example he beheld amongst the Congregation of Common Life. We shall take his own words:—

Having come in my youth to Deventer to pursue my studies, I sought my way to Windesheim, to visit the Canons Regular there, amongst whom I found my own brother. By his advice I was led to seek the acquaintance of a certain

curate of the Church of Deventer, named Master Florentius, a most devout and excellent priest, the fame of whose holiness had spread to the northern parts of Germany, and whom I had already been drawn to love. The crowd of students who assembled round him when he celebrated the divine Mysteries sufficiently denoted the high estimation in which he was held; for he was noble in presence and speech, and pleasing to all beholders, a true servant of God, an obedient and devoted child of our Holy Mother Church. The reverend father received me most kindly, and, moved by charity, kept me awhile in his own house. He also placed me in the school, and provided me with books needful for my studies. Finally he obtained for me hospitality with a certain excellent lady, who treated me and other clerics with the greatest benevolence. In the holy company of Florentius and his brethren I had before me daily examples of the most edifying kind, which excited my warmest admiration. I reflected on the regularity of their lives, and upon the words of grace which flowed from their lips. Never, within my recollection, have I met such men as those,—so fervent, so pious, so animated with charity towards God and their neighbour. Living amongst seculars they were in every respect wholly unworldly, and appeared perfectly indifferent to all things of earth. Dwelling at home in peaceful retirement they devoted themselves to the copying of books, to pious reading and meditations, only relaxing their hours of labour by the utterance of ejaculatory prayers. Every morning after matins they assembled in the church, and there, during the celebration of Mass, prostrate in humble attitude, they raised their hands and souls to God, pouring forth their prayers and sighs, imploring His mercy through the intercession of the saving Victim.

The founder and first spiritual director of this most excellent Congregation was Florentius Radewyn. This great Master, adorned by every virtue and filled with divine wisdom, had truly studied the Lord Jesus Christ, and together with his priests and clerics strove humbly to imitate the manner of life of the Apostles. All were united,

heart and soul, in Almighty God. What each possessed was given to the common fund, and using a frugal fare and humble raiment they dismissed from their minds all solicitude about the future. Consecrating themselves with willing hearts to the service of God all obeyed absolutely their Rector or his Vicars, and accepting obedience as their fundamental rule, strove with their utmost vigour to conquer themselves, to resist their passions, and break down self-will; all the while earnestly begging that they should be severely reprimanded for any faults or negligences into which they might happen to fall.

It is needless to say how rich in grace and in the spirit of true devotion were these holy men. Their words and example edified many, and the patience with which they endured the contempt of the frivolous moved numbers to despise the false joys of this world. Those who had formerly scorned them and judged their lives as ignoble and foolish, presently converted to God, touched by conscience and experiencing the grace of devotion, confessed that these men were manifestly true servants and friends of the Lord.

Thus, crowds of men and women, despising all worldly gratifications, turned themselves to God, and strove, under the guidance of Florentius, to obey the precepts of the Church and devoutly practise works of mercy towards the poor. All his brethren, clinging to the words of life, aided the holy master, and like brilliant stars in the firmament shone forth amidst the darkness of a decaying world. Some amongst them, priests distinguished for sacred lore, preached with great ardour in the churches, and by their exhortations the faithful were instructed unto justice, hearing the Word of God and doing good works.

Such were the impressions made on à Kempis' mind during nearly seven years which he spent at Deventer prosecuting his studies in preparation for the religious life he had chosen. We are indebted to his pen for a touching history of his companions there, whose holy

edifying lives prepare us for the great spiritual treatise—*The Imitation*—which later in life he put together. In truth the sentiments and teachings of that book are foreshadowed in all we read of the life he witnessed at Deventer, and later at Mount St. Agnes and Windesheim. In my former essay I have entered into many details on this subject, which the brief space now at my command obliges me to omit.

Besides Florentius, Thomas's special friends at this time were Arnold van Schoonhoven, Boehm, Gronde, Berner, Brinkerinck, Brune, Gerard of Zutphen, Van Buren, James of Viana, and John Ketel.

In the year 1399 Thomas was nearly twenty years of age, and then, as he tells us, he betook himself to the Monastery of Mount St. Agnes, near Zwolle (one of the affiliated houses of Windesheim), where his brother John was Prior, and earnestly besought admission. This was the year preceding the death of Florentius, and we have reason to believe that this step was taken by his advice and under his direction. Certain it is that he was admitted, and there commenced the long career of religious life which ended only with his death, in 1471. We may imagine the joy with which the brothers met on this touching occasion, realizing the words with which Thomas opens his first sermon to the Novices: "Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity." Thomas, entering Mount St. Agnes in 1399, was invested as a member of the order in 1408. According to the continuator of the *Chronicle of Mount St. Agnes* he was ordained five years later, in his thirty-third year.

Here begins to develop, for those who ponder over his

works, the beautiful picture of the life of Thomas à Kempis. It is only there we can realize what manner of man he was—how simple, and yet profound,—how merciful to others, although so perfect himself,—what a priest—preacher—confessor—master of novices—historian—and bright example of all virtues. Then it becomes easy to understand how he, so keen to appreciate and profit by all he saw, could reap the harvest of holiness, and garner in *The Imitation* the pith and philosophy of virtue.

It would scarcely repay my reader were I to reproduce at any length the *Chronicle of Mount St. Agnes*, detailing the early struggles and poverty of the new monastery, the subsequent increase of its resources and members, their edifying lives and deaths, the indomitable courage and perseverance of its first Prior, John à Kempis, and of his successors, William Vornken, Theodoric Clive, and others, who brought the Institution to completion and prosperity. I must even omit all account of the generous assistance given in the hour of need by earnest friends, such as Everard Eza, the skilled physician to whom à Kempis attributes his rescue from a dangerous illness. Yet his was a wondrous and touching story. Sceptic in faith he came one day through curiosity to hear Groot preach in Deventer. Smitten by the words of the great missionary, he "who came to scoff remained to pray," and mastered by the influence of the gifted evangelist entered religion, and after a life devoted to the service of God and his neighbour, as Pastor at Almelo, died in the odour of sanctity, in 1404.

John Cele, rector of the schools at Zwolle, the companion of Groot's visit to Ruysbroeck, was another

of Thomas's friends, over whose career I would gladly linger, but I must not tarry. Perhaps some who feel interested in this little sketch will turn to the source from whence I draw, and satisfy their longing for a rare history of holy lives and deeds. It is necessary, however, that I should direct attention now to an event which I believe exercised a potent influence in moulding the spiritual career of Thomas à Kempis, and contributed materially towards fitting him for the compilation of the great book—*The Imitation of Christ.*

When John à Kempis, the first Prior of Agnetenberg, resigned office, he was succeeded in 1408 by William Vornken, of Utrecht, a distinguished member of the Congregation of Windesheim. This new Prior was evidently, as we find by the account given of him by Thomas, and more fully by Busch, a most remarkable man. If we turn to page 35 of the *Chronicle of Mount St. Agnes*, and chapter xxxiii. of the first book of the *Chronicle of Windesheim*, we find details concerning Vornken which forcibly remind us of *The Imitation of Christ.* In fact it almost seems as if that book was the reflection of the holy Prior's life, virtues, and teaching. The love of poverty, contempt for all things earthly, persevering industry, and above all, deep devotion to the Holy Sacrament of the Altar, were his leading characteristics. In addition, he was conspicuous for his profound knowledge of Holy Writ, for love of discipline, prudence in advising, patience with the afflicted, kindness in consoling the tempted, endurance in adversity, exemplary diligence in all things, love of solitude and silence, compunction, meditation, gratitude to God for all His blessings, devotion to the feasts of

the Church, relish for all things that appertain to God, trust in Providence in the hour of trouble, sympathy with the ailing, and charity in praying for the dead.

As Vornken remained Prior for sixteen years, it will be observed that he was Thomas's immediate Superior from 1408 until some years after *The Imitation of Christ* had made its appearance, and the internal evidence of similarity between this holy man and the book is irresistible and significant, adding a link to the long chain of reasoning, which, as we shall later see, points to Thomas as the author. This has been already noticed by Grube in his able history of John Busch.

In the year 1424 John Vos van Huesden, Prior of the Mother House of Windesheim, died. Shortly afterwards he was succeeded by William Vornken, who was transferred from Mount St. Agnes, and Theodoric Clive was elected to fill his place. Although the precise date is not expressly named in the *Chronicle of Mount St. Agnes* we have good reason to believe that about this time Thomas à Kempis was elected sub-Prior, and undoubtedly we find him occupying that office in 1429.

In this latter year a grievous visitation fell upon the brethren of Windesheim and Mount St. Agnes. Owing to a dispute concerning the appointment of a new bishop the diocese was placed under interdict by the Holy See, and as a large section of the laity resisted the decision of the Pope (Martin V.), the Brothers were subjected to persecution and obliged to fly for safety. Those from Mount St. Agnes, leaving their convent in charge of a few lay brothers, departed first to Hasselt, and thence, by a perilous voyage on the Zuyder Zee, betook themselves to a monastery at Lunenkerk, near Harlingen, in

Friesland, to escape from ill-treatment, and to carry out needful reforms at their destination. All did not remain at Lunenkerk. A certain brother John, one of the oldest members of the community, who, in spite of age and infirmity, wished to accompany the others to Friesland, was sent home on account of his failing health, and died in 1430.

In the following year Thomas à Kempis was himself sent to assist his ailing brother John, who was then Rector and Confessor at the Convent of Bethany, near Arnheim. There he remained for fourteen months, until, in the month of November, 1432, he closed his brother's eyes in the peaceful sleep of a holy death. Just about that time the storm of persecution against the Brothers subsided, the interdict was removed from the diocese (by Pope Eugenius IV.), the exiles returned from Lunenkerk to Mount St. Agnes, and shortly afterwards Thomas joined them there. From this date until his death in 1471 he remained at Agnetenberg, occupying at first the office of Procurator, and later that of sub-Prior, to which he was re-elected in the year 1448. So far as we can judge from all the information available this latter period was one of repose and devotion to the spiritual life. We are indebted to Thomas's anonymous and nearly contemporary biographer for the information that he was once elected Procurator, or Bursar. The *Chronicle* contains no such record; yet it seems but natural that the author of the essay *On the Faithful Steward*, even mystical as it is in certain respects, should have occupied at some time this post. According to the same authority Thomas was relieved of this duty, which was uncongenial to him, and re-elected as sub-Prior, in order to enable him

to devote himself unreservedly to the cultivation of the interior life.

Aided by the many interesting personal details which we find in the memoirs of Thomas à Kempis, written by his anonymous biographer, by Ascensius, Tolensis, and Rosweyd, we can easily picture to ourselves his saintly old age at Mount St. Agnes. The convent, which he remembered in its commencement in poverty and hardship, was now completed and prosperous; but those who had made it so, his own brother included, had gone to their reward. To use his own poetic words, often repeated in the obituary records of his *Chronicle*, they had "migrated," and now rested with the Lord; while he, who had taught so many to enter the narrow gate, and tread the thorny way of perfection, still lingered on earth. But what an honoured old age!—"It is good for a man when he hath borne the yoke from his youth." "But they that are learned shall shine as the brightness of the firmament, and they that instruct many to justice, as stars for all eternity."

We can picture à Kempis in our minds as his portrait and the descriptions help us. A man of good figure, scarcely under middle height, of dark complexion and vivid colour, the forehead broad and high, the face a little elongated—a noble head, with elevated crown and piercing intelligent eyes, always gentle and kind, lenient and charitable to the weak, encouraging to the timid, occupied at all times with his various duties, and unceasingly at work. We can think of him at the altar, offering the Holy Sacrifice, burning with the ardour which he infused into the Fourth Book of *The Imitation*. *Again,* in the choir, singing the Holy Office, standing

erect—unsupported—almost raised from earth, with eyes uplifted to heaven, and visage irradiated by holy awe and delight! We can imagine him as he pours the words of consolation into the ear of the weeping penitent, or points out to the wavering the road to security. We can picture him preaching, as he was ever willing to do, to the crowds who flocked to hear him at Mount St. Agnes. We can imagine him surrounded by the community, silent while other topics are discussed, then bursting into eloquence when God and His saints are named, and pouring forth in a limpid torrent the words of wisdom.

Again, in the privacy of his little cell, we behold him scourging himself with a heavy discipline, and chanting his favourite hymn *Stetit Jesus*. We can picture him as he walked and conversed with the Brothers, suddenly feeling the inward voice of God, and saying: "Beloved brethren, I must go. Some one awaits me in my cell." Who the visitor to his cell was we know from *The Imitation*, where we can realize his communion with God. We can picture him as he comes from lauds, refusing himself further sleep or rest, and devoting the dawn of morning to his writings. Idleness he abhorred; Labour, as he tells us, was his companion; Silence his friend; Prayer his auxiliary.

Thomas had ever been an indefatigable writer, and copied books innumerable, both for the use of the monastery and for sale. He had written out the whole Bible in four great volumes; also a large missal for the use of the Brothers; some of the smaller treatises of St. Bernard; and moreover had composed a vast number of spiritual treatises. How truly he

revered the work of the copyist we know from his twentieth Concio, in which he writes as follows:—

> Verily it is a good work to transcribe the books which Jesus loves, by which the knowledge of Him is diffused, His precepts taught, and their practice inculcated. Neither can it be doubted that thou wilt be loved by Him, and amply rewarded if thou dost diligently write out holy books for the honour and glory of God and the good of thy neighbour. If he shall not lose his reward who gives a cup of cold water to his thirsting neighbour, what will be the recompense to him who by copying good books opens unto others the fountain of eternal life?

À Kempis' love for study was so proverbial that when his portrait was taken he was represented sitting in the open air, the buildings of Mount St. Agnes in the distant background, while on the pages of a volume at his feet are inscribed the words, "I have sought rest everywhere, and never found it, unless in a little nook with a little book."

It is quite possible, with a little labour, to trace à Kempis' spiritual progress in his works. The difficulty lies in selecting illustrations from the boundless field of choice. The earlier stages are pictured in *The Soliloquy of the Soul;* its later development appears in *The Imitation of Christ;* and his final ascent into the realms of mysticism is manifested in the opening chapters of his almost unknown essay on *The Elevation of the Mind.* If space permitted I should wish to tarry over this theme, to show by many illustrations how completely and with what versatility he measured the heights of spiritual elevation, fathomed the depths of human feeling, and indicated the way to perfection. I might point out his study of the virtues of poverty, humility, and patience, as taught

in *The Three Tabernacles;* likewise his spiritual exercises, his ideas of true compunction, of solitude and silence, of mortification of self, of a good and peaceful life, his instruction of youth, and of the novices and brethren under his guidance. All these topics and many others are exhaustively discussed in the second volume of his works; but it is impossible to enter upon them now.

The Imitation of Christ, the best known of his works, represents less than one-tenth of the whole. There are not a few amongst them which strongly resemble it, and fully bear comparison with that great masterpiece. I only regret they are not better known. All who study à Kempis' works must love them for their truthfulness, simplicity, and unction.

In his latter days, from the time of his re-election as sub-Prior until his death, he would seem to have been devoted entirely to his favourite occupations—praying, reading, composing, transcribing, teaching the novices, consoling and directing those who sought his aid, and quietly jotting down the simple records of his monastery. Meanwhile, the years rolled by in calm and peace, as the *Chronicle* tells, and Thomas was growing old. Not, indeed, that we can observe in his manuscripts the signs of weakened sight or faltering hand. It is said that he never required spectacles; and the codex of 1456, written when he was in his seventy-sixth year, is as perfect as that of 1441, and quite a masterpiece of caligraphic art.

Finally, we come to the last entry in his *Chronicle.* I will give it here in its touching simplicity:—

In the year of our Lord 1471, on the feast of St. Anthony he Confessor [February 12], in the morning after High Mass,

a devout laic named John Gerlac died. He was a native of Dese, near Zwolle, and nearly seventy-two years old. He had lived with us for more than fifty-three years, in great humility, simplicity and patience, and had endured much labour and many privations. But, amongst other virtues which he possessed, he was pre-eminent for taciturnity, so much so that often he would speak very little for a whole day, and even in his labours he gave to others an example of silence. Shortly before his death he was seized with apoplexy, and became in a measure delirious. He was buried in our cemetery with the other laics.

So far as we know these were the last words ever written by Thomas à Kempis. He himself died in the following May, and the continuator of the *Chronicle* records the events in these words :—

In the same year [1471], on the feast of St. James the Less [May 1], after compline, our Brother Thomas Haemerken, born at Kempen, a town in the diocese of Cologne, departed from this earth. He was in the ninety-second year of his age, the sixty-third of his religious clothing, and the fifty-eighth of his priesthood. In his youth he was a disciple, at Deventer, of Master Florentius, who sent him to his [Thomas's] own brother, who was then Prior of Mount St. Agnes. Thomas, who at that period was twenty years of age, received the habit from his brother at the end of six years' probation, and from the outset of his monastic life he endured great poverty, temptations, and labours. He copied out our Bible, and various other books, some of which were used by the convent, and others were sold. Moreover, for the edification of young persons he wrote various little treatises in a plain and simple style, but in reality great and important works, both in doctrine and efficacy for good. He had a special devotion to the Passion of our Lord, and understood admirably how to console those afflicted by interior trials and temptations. Finally, having attained a

ripe old age, he was afflicted with dropsy of the limbs, slept in the Lord in the year 1471, and was buried in the east side of the Cloister, by the side of brother Peter Herbort.

Such is the brief outline which I venture to offer of the life of the great Thomas à Kempis. Those who seek to understand his glory and true grandeur must study his spiritual works. Lowly monk as he was we find in his career and writings the characteristics of a master-mind,—of one who, having realized the greatness of God, and fathomed the shallow nothingness of this world, was enabled to practise, and to teach as no other man ever taught before or since (the Apostles excepted) the one great lesson,—that in patient suffering we must imitate Christ if we would be with Him in eternity. "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. Having, then read and searched out all, be this our last conclusion—that through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of God."

Having briefly reviewed the history of the times and surroundings wherein Thomas à Kempis lived, and sketched an outline of his career, I come to the least grateful portion of my task—namely, the story of the controversy which long raged about the authorship of *The Imitation of Christ*, and which, after one fashion or another, ever sought to deprive the saintly Canon of Agnetenberg of the glory of having brought the precious volume into existence.

I will now begin to exhibit the proofs which demonstrate the solid grounds upon which I rest my belief that,

despite vexatious controversy, Thomas à Kempis was the author of *The Imitation of Christ.*

Many who know the great book well, who study it constantly and love its words of holy wisdom, are unaware that it has been the subject of one of the most extraordinary controversies known in the history of literature—a controversy often heated, occasionally bitter, not always carried on with dignity and straightforwardness, and unhappily displaying at times evil passions which the writer of the book would have condemned emphatically. This strange contention touches the authorship of the golden treatise, and has given origin to several hundred essays, more or less voluminous.

Let us see how all this came to pass. *The Imitation of Christ* appeared anonymously, as was frequent with books in those days, and very natural for the work of one who dwells on the maxim, "Love to be unknown and valued as nothing." So far as an exhaustive investigation leads we are drawn to the conviction that it appeared in the first third of the fifteenth century, and from that period spread rapidly and widely, being extensively transcribed and circulated throughout the monastic world. There is not the faintest evidence that it existed before the period named, notwithstanding untenable statements advanced to the contrary.

During the lifetime of Thomas à Kempis the authorship of *The Imitation* was distinctly attributed to him by members of his own Order, who necessarily had the best possible information on the subject. Moreover, its parentage, so far from being denied by Thomas, who certainly was not a man to borrow the plumes of others, was tacitly accepted by him when he placed it in his

manuscript of 1441 at the head of a series of other treatises which we have the strongest reason to believe were of his own composition. The world at large was left in ignorance upon the subject, and formed its opinions according as it was led.

At an early period of its history *The Imitation* was attributed to St. Bernard. Nothing could be more natural. Some early manuscripts and editions actually appeared under his name. In tone of thought it strongly resembles his works; but when it was discovered that it quotes St. Francis of Assisi, who was born nearly thirty years after the death of St. Bernard, it became evident that the Abbot of Clairvaux could not have been the author. No mistake could be more excusable. Any one who studies the book closely, side by side with the works of St. Bernard, will understand how natural it was, from intrinsic evidence, that it should have been attributed to him at the first blush; but will also realize that the latinity of *The Imitation* proves that he could not have been the author. No two styles of expression or diction could be more radically different.

In turn the authorship has been erroneously assigned to many others, whose claims vanish upon investigation. Amongst these I may mention St. Bonaventure, Thomas Gallus, Henry de Kalcar, Landolph of Saxony, Ubertinus de Cassalis, Innocent III., Piedro Rainaluzzi, John Tambaco, John Charlier de Gerson, the mighty Chancellor of the University of Paris, and John à Kempis, the elder brother of Thomas.

Early in the seventeenth century a certain mythical candidate for the authorship of *The Imitation of Christ* was introduced upon the stage, and all the influence of

the great Order of St. Benedict was put forward to substantiate his pretensions. This claimant is the so-called John Gersen, who is said to have existed, to have been a Benedictine, and to have flourished in the thirteenth century as Abbot at Vercelli, in Piedmont. By and by we shall investigate his position.

In fine, I believe I may safely state that the only candidates for the authorship of the great book whose pretensions need discussion are—Thomas à Kempis, John Charlier de Gerson, and the so-called John Gersen of Vercelli. A few critics have adopted a curious theory concerning the authorship of *The Imitation* which scarcely requires notice. They reject all the candidates hitherto named, and argue that the author is unknown, but of date anterior to à Kempis. Their peculiar contention will be considered in due course.

We shall commence by considering the claims of Thomas à Kempis. Already we have seen something of his life, and of the surroundings amidst which it was spent, and can therefore understand how peculiarly capable he was of putting together this masterpiece of ascetical teaching. Trained in the school of spirituality inaugurated by Groot, Radewyn, Vos van Huesden, Vornken, and their companions, his mind became the mirror of their teaching and transferred itself to the pages of *The Imitation*. An ascetic in the highest sense of the word he wrote for those within the cloister, and so truthfully, lovingly, and with such breadth of human sympathy, that his words must live until the end of time.

> A solitary monk within his cell,
> Whose walls did make an island of his life,
> Surrounded by the waves of war and strife,

His hours obedient to the convent bell
Until the grave had closed upon his corpse.
  A life secluded from the haunts of men ;
  A soul that found an utterance, by the pen,
For hope and sorrow, joy and sad remorse ;
A soul that longed for purity, that taught
  Man's duty was to beat down pride and sin,
  To conquer passion, keep all white within,
And shun a world with dark and evil fraught.
  Ages have past, yet still, amid the strife,
  Is heard the music of that far-off life.[1]

It will be convenient to discuss the arguments which go to prove that Thomas à Kempis was the author of *The Imitation* under the following heads :—

I. Contemporary witnesses.
II. External evidence, as manifested by the manuscripts.
III. Internal evidence.

I. *Contemporary Witnesses.*

It is obvious that if one or more trustworthy witnesses can be cited who knew Thomas à Kempis in his lifetime, and state unequivocally that he was the author of *The Imitation of Christ*, no reasonable person can resist such testimony. Now, this is exactly what can be done. Two witnesses who knew Thomas personally aver that he was the author, and this long before the great controversy arose upon the subject. Let us see who these contemporary witnesses were.

JOHN BUSCH.

The first is John Busch, the Chronicler of Windesheim. It will be needful to say a few words here

[1] W. E. A. Axon, in *The Academy*, September 4, 1886.

respecting this remarkable and devoted man. Born in 1400, he entered the monastery of Windesheim, and became a canon regular of St. Augustine in 1420. He died in 1479, eight years later than Thomas à Kempis, having completed, in 1464 (that is seven years before à Kempis' death) the *Chronicle of Windesheim*, one of his most remarkable works, of which we have seen something. That he was a man of rare ability and integrity is proved by the fact that when the Papal Legate, Cardinal de Cusa, undertook the reform of the monasteries of Lower Germany, he selected Busch as his companion and co-visitor. Leibnitz, and Trithemius of Spanheim, wrote of him in terms of the warmest praise.

Let us now see what this unimpeachable witness tells us concerning Thomas à Kempis and *The Imitation of Christ.* Turning to his *Chronicle*, where he speaks of the death of Vos van Huesden, we read as follows. I translate the passage:—

> It happened a few days before his death that two well-known Brothers of our own Order from Mount St. Agnes, near Zwolle, came to Windesheim to consult with our said Prior upon certain affairs; of whom one, Brother Thomas à Kempis, a man of exemplary life, who composed many devout books—viz., *He who followeth Me*, *Of the Imitation of Christ*, with others, had the following night a dream foreshadowing future events.

Such evidence coming from such a source is conclusive; but we have much more to bring forward in corroboration.

HERMANN RYD.

The second contemporary witness who knew Thomas à Kempis personally is Hermann Ryd. He, like Busch,

was a distinguished member of the congregation of Windesheim. Born in 1408, he entered the monastery of Wittenberg in 1427, and was later sent to the Tyrol by Cardinal de Cusa to assist in the work of monastic reformation there. In 1447 he was sent to the monastery of the "New Work," near Halle, where he distinguished himself by his piety and learning.

In his description of the Convent of the Canons Regular of Windesheim, contained in a codex, dated 1493, in the monastery of St. Nicolas, in Passau, he writes as follows. I translate the passage :—

> The Brother who compiled the book of *The Imitation* is called or named Thomas, sub-Prior in the said monastery of Mount St. Agnes, near Zwolle, in the diocese of Utrecht and province of Cologne; and this said monastery is distant a league from Windesheim, which is the head monastery, in which the Canons Regular of the Province of Cologne, Mayence, and Treves hold yearly a General Chapter. The said compiler was still alive in 1454. And I, Brother Hermann, of the monastery of the "New Work," near Halle, in the diocese of Magdeburg, being sent to the said General Chapter, spoke with him.

Under ordinary circumstances it would seem needless to add to the testimony of Busch and Ryd, who knew Thomas—were members of his own order—and pointedly declared him to be the author of *The Imitation;* but in the present case it becomes prudent to corroborate their authority, because such extraordinary and pertinacious ingenuity has been expended in the endeavour to support phantom claims by discrediting à Kempis. Therefore I shall quote a few more witnesses, out of the many, who were either contempo-

rary, or nearly so, and whose testimony is ample to establish the claims of the holy Canon of Agnetenberg, even if we had not the foregoing irresistible evidence.

JOHN MAUBURN.

John Mauburn, a native of Brussels, entered the monastery of Mount St. Agnes *shortly after the death of Thomas à Kempis.*

In 1491 he published at Basle a book entitled *Rosetum Spiritualium Exercitiorum*, in which he quotes *The Imitation* as the work of à Kempis. Again, in his *Scala Communionis* he does the same. Finally, in his *Venatorium*, he adds the words, "Qui Frater Thomas à Kempis inter caetera opuscula quae fecit, composuit libellum, *Qui sequitur me*, quem falso Domino Gerson attribuunt."

THE ANONYMOUS CONTEMPORARY BIOGRAPHER OF THOMAS À KEMPIS.

This author wrote his biography shortly after à Kempis' death, and states that his informants were the brethren of Mount St. Agnes, who had lived with Thomas à Kempis, and had known him intimately. In the course of the life this writer distinctly quotes *The Imitation of Christ* as the work of à Kempis, and adds a catalogue of his various spiritual treatises, including therein the four books of *The Imitation.*

Let us remember that the evidence of Mauburn and the Anonymous Biographer has the special value of coming from Mount St. Agnes, the domicile and home of à Kempis.

ADRIAN DE BUT.

The evidence of this witness comes with singular force in defence of the rights of Thomas à Kempis.

The Royal Commission of History of Belgium brought out, in 1870, under the supervision of Baron Kervyn de Lettenhove, the *Chronicles of Adrian de But*, a monk of the famous Cistercian abbey of Dunes. These *Chronicles* date from 1431, and are continued up to the death of De But, in 1480. Late in the *Chronicles*, and referring to the year 1459, the following note occurs :—"Hoc anno Frater Thomas de Kempis, de Monte Sanctae Agnetis professor ordinis regularium Canonicorum multos scriptis suis divulgatis aedificat: Hic vitam sanctae Lidwigis descripsit et quoddam volumen metrice super illud *Qui sequitur me*."

Here we find Adrian de But, the contemporary of Thomas à Kempis, attributing to him *The Imitation of Christ*, designating it, as usual, by its first sentence, "*Qui sequitur me*," and adding the word *metrice*. This latter term might have remained an inexplicable puzzle were it not for the discovery made about 1872 by Dr. Carl Hirsche, that *The Imitation of Christ*, as well as most of the other compositions of Thomas à Kempis, is written and punctuated so as to be rhythmical! Herein, too, is found the explanation of the fact that certain old manuscripts of the book bear the title "Musica Ecclesiastica."

A remarkable and important fact connected with the evidence of de But is, that it was until recently supposed to refer to a much later period than it really does. However, a careful examination of the manu-

script itself, which I made at the Burgundian Library at Brussels, in 1887, with MM. Ruelens and Hosdey, has quite satisfied us that this note refers to the year 1459, that is twelve years before the death of à Kempis.

I have published a full account of this discovery, with an illustrative photogravure, in the August number of the *Précis Historiques*, Brussels, 1889.

WESSEL GANSFORD.

According to Albert Hardenberg, the biographer of Wessel, the latter acquired his first taste for true theology by reading *The Imitation of Christ, and actually went to Mount St. Agnes specially to make the acquaintance of its author, Thomas à Kempis.*

GINTHER ZAINER.

The earliest printed edition of *The Imitation* was brought out by the above famous printer, at Augsburg, about the years 1471 and 1472. The Editor, in the final note, distinctly attributes the work to Thomas à Kempis.

A beautiful photographic facsimile of this celebrated edition was reproduced in 1894, by Elliot Stock, of London.

MATHIAS FARINATOR.

Mathias Farinator, a Carmelite monk of Augsburg, and contemporary of Thomas à Kempis, transcribed *The Imitation* between 1472 and 1475, and states that à Kempis was its author.

PETER SCHOTT.

Peter Schott was a Canon of Strasburg, a noted divine, poet, and literary critic. He wrote a laudatory

preface to the works of Gerson, published in 1488, and distinctly states that the book, *On Contempt of this World*, a well-known synonym of *The Imitation*, was not the work of the great Chancellor, but of a certain Thomas, a Canon Regular.

JEHAN LAMBERT.

Jehan Lambert translated *The Imitation* into French, in 1490, and asserts that it is the work neither of St. Bernard, nor of John Gerson, but of Thomas à Kempis.

PETER DANHAUSSER.

I have in my possession a copy of the works of Thomas à Kempis edited by the above, and printed in Nuremberg by Hochfeder, in 1494. At the head of the first chapter of *The Imitation* we find a distinct declaration that its author *was* Thomas à Kempis, and *not* the Chancellor Gerson. A preface to this edition by the Carthusian, George Pirckamer, adds the weight of his authority to the text.

MARTIN SIMUS.

Martin Simus, of Strasburg, in his edition of the works of Gerson (1494), again distinctly states that the book, *On the Contempt of the World*, was not the work of that author, but of a certain Thomas, Canon Regular.

TRITHEMIUS.

Trithemius, better known as John Trittenheim, Benedictine Abbot of Spanheim, was one of the most learned ecclesiastical historians of his time. He wrote in 1494 and 1495, and attributes *The Imitation* of

Christ to à Kempis, the author of the *Sermons to Novices.* His evidence is *most important,* as showing that in his time *The Imitation* was *not* attributed to a Benedictine author, but to a member of the Congregation of Windesheim.

JODOCUS BADIUS ASCENSIUS.

Jodocus Badius Ascensius, a man of great learning, edited and published the works of Thomas à Kempis in the year 1521, including therein *The Imitation of Christ;* adding in his preface that he undertook the work at the request of the Benedictines of St. Germain-des-Prés, the Carthusians of Paris, and the Celestinians of Soissons. Evidently all these held that Thomas was the author.

If space permitted I might go on adding witnesses, but this seems utterly needless. Any one who could resist the evidence of those already quoted is not likely to be influenced if they were multiplied by thousands. It seems impossible that any one can read the foregoing testimony—coming from witnesses either contemporary or nearly so, who, acting independently and above suspicion, unite in attributing the authorship of *The Imitation of Christ* to Thomas à Kempis—without arriving at the conclusion that he, and he alone, must have been its author.

All this evidence being moreover of a nature so personal and domestic, coming largely from those who either knew à Kempis himself, or were intimate with his companions, appears simply irresistible. In *this* connection let me observe that Thomas is the *only*

candidate in whose favour a *single* contemporary witness can be produced.

If I stopped here, I believe no rational person could doubt his authorship; but, for reasons already named, and to complete the statement of his case, I think it well to show something of the *External Evidence* of the various manuscripts in the same direction, and also the *Internal Evidence* which the book itself similarly offers.

II.—*External Evidence of Manuscripts.*

This branch of the controversy covers so wide a field that it would be impossible to treat it fully in the present essay, and I must confine myself to little more than an abstract of the conclusions to which it inevitably leads. I shall commence with a few observations touching the age of the manuscripts. This is a matter of necessity, in order to demolish certain baseless fabrics erected by à Kempis' adversaries with the design of invalidating his claims.

In the first place, I may state, with what I am satisfied is incontrovertible certainty, that *no manuscript of "The Imitation of Christ" has ever been produced of an age antecedent to the mature manhood of Thomas à Kempis —that is to say, the first third of the fifteenth century.* We may find many efforts made to discredit this statement, but not one is in the slightest degree worthy of credence.

The various manuscripts, numbering four hundred and twenty, may be classified into those which are dated and those without date. The earliest dated manuscript, worthy of confidence, is that from Hattem, near Zwolle,

and it bears the record 1424. Let it be remembered that at this period à Kempis was forty-four years of age.

There exists one manuscript, bearing the dates 1384 and 1385, to which I must allude at some length, for the purpose of showing that it is not worthy of the smallest confidence.

The codex in question is named the "Paulanus"; it comes originally from the Benedictine monastery of Wiblingen, and now belongs to that of St. Paul, in Carinthia. Oddly enough it has only recently been brought prominently to light. Dom Wolfsgruber, in his work on John Gersen, gives a description of the manuscript and a facsimile of the two last pages. He writes with praiseworthy caution, and candidly avows that there are many difficulties connected with it. As the foregoing dates, referring to a period when à Kempis was a child, would, if genuine, manifestly displace him, I felt convinced that a thorough investigation of this manuscript should be made, all the more so as I demonstrated in my essay of 1887 that the account given of it by its sponsor, Dom Wolfsgruber, of Vienna, is most unsatisfactory. Accordingly I wrote to Dom Augustine Duda, the Abbot of St. Paul's, asking permission to examine the codex, and to photograph such portions as I deemed necessary.

In due course my request was granted, and in the autumn of 1889, properly equipped, I made the journey —six days from Dublin—and was most kindly received. It gives me great pleasure to record here the perfect freedom I was allowed at St. Paul's, both by the Reverend Abbot, and Dom Achatz, the Hofmeister of

the monastery, and to state my conviction of the good faith and love of truth with which they permitted me to examine and photograph the manuscript, for whose shortcomings they certainly are in no way accountable. It came to them from Wiblingen, after many vicissitudes, for preservation and safe keeping, and involves them in no responsibility whatever. I have published the result in the *Précis Historiques*, Brussels, May, 1890, and shall here merely record it in a few words :—

First. The writing of the Paulanus manuscript shows it to belong to the sixteenth century, about one hundred years after the death of à Kempis—

Secondly. The dates are all clumsy forgeries—

Thirdly, exeat the Paulanus manuscript for ever.

Respecting the undated manuscripts it will be necessary to consider their value in the controversy with some care. À Kempis' adversaries made vigorous efforts to turn their uncertain ages into weapons against him—with what result we shall soon see. I need not, in these days of more perfect information and knowledge, allude to the wild statements of enthusiasts like Dom Cajetan and De Grégory, who were foolhardy enough to attribute the Arona and Avogadro manuscripts to the thirteenth century. No one hears of such eccentricity now without a smile; but there are still to be found theorists—like Wolfsgruber, Puyol, Loth, and others—who would argue that some of the undated manuscripts of *The Imitation* may belong to the end of the fourteenth or first years of the fifteenth centuries; in other words, to a period when Thomas à Kempis was too young to have been the author. This theory must be first discounted, and then weighed

against the positive facts which point to him as the author.

The consideration of the undated manuscripts of *The Imitation* brings us at once to the subject of paleography —the science of determining the age of an undated manuscript, from its style, writing, abbreviations, &c. Obviously if one single manuscript of *The Imitation* could be definitely proved to have been written at the end of the fourteenth, or the very commencement of the fifteenth century, the claims of Thomas à Kempis should be abandoned at once and for ever; *but this is exactly what has never been done, despite all efforts.* For centuries his adversaries have searched the libraries of Europe, but their long-wished-for manuscript *has not been found.* Not a single manuscript of *The Imitation* which has been put forward by à Kempis' adversaries as of date excluding his authorship has stood the test of paleographic science, or been shown to be earlier than his middle age. I may here observe that the claims made for the Italian codices named above, in this connection, are thus annihilated.

It is a very significant fact that Father Denifle, who, as subarchivist of the Vatican Library, must have exceptional knowledge of dated Italian manuscripts of all ages, and therefore be an excellent judge of those which are not dated, asserts positively that every single one of the manuscripts of *The Imitation* put forward by the Gersenists belongs to the fifteenth century, and not the earliest portion of it. Let it be clearly understood and remembered, anent the arguments of those who contend for an imaginary author of the thirteenth century, that, while the libraries of Europe are filled with manuscripts of the

thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, not a solitary codex of *The Imitation of Christ* has been examined by this highly skilled expert, Father Denifle, which he does not declare to belong to the fifteenth century, and not the commencement of it!

In fine, *it may be confidently repeated that not a single manuscript of "The Imitation," dated or undated, can be shown to be antecedent to à Kempis' middle age.*

Taking the manuscripts of *The Imitation*, dated and undated, as a whole, they offer a very remarkable subject for study and analysis. In number they amount at present to about four hundred and twenty, and their derivation and origin may be roughly stated as follows: —Twenty-five belong to France, nineteen to Italy, fifteen to England, while the rest—just three hundred and sixty-one—appertain to Germany, and especially the lower district of Germany, including Holland and the Low Countries, which formed part of Germany at the period when *The Imitation* appeared. Further, when we come to examine each manuscript carefully, we find that about sixty point to Thomas à Kempis by indications more or less definite, and a large proportion of the whole show contact and amity between Windesheim and the various monastic institutions from which they emanate.

Thus à Kempis' candidature is supported, in the manuscripts, by an irresistible mass of probability.

This subject, if fully worked out, would need thirty or forty pages to develop, and this I cannot give at present; neither is it necessary, because any one who chooses can read Father Becker's essay on the subject, which I merely epitomize. His research, with the pitiless

logic of fact, leaves no room for doubt as to the origin of *The Imitation* in the heart of the school of which Thomas was the recognized exponent, historian, and writer.

Let me here revert, for a moment, to à Kempis' own manuscript of 1441, already quoted. The four first essays in that codex are the four books of *The Imitation*, followed by nine other treatises, which have come down to us as his undisputed works. If, then, we reject Thomas as the author of *The Imitation*, we must accept the impossible theory that he deliberately placed in front of his own compositions four treatises which he knew were not his! The idea is too absurd for consideration.

To conclude this subject of the evidence of the manuscripts, I would urge that it bears irresistibly in favour of à Kempis, and this is most significant when we remember all the circumstances of the case—his obscurity, the anonymous appearance of the book, the ignorance of the world at large as to its origin, and the spirit of indifference of the Windesheimers as to any claim for its paternity. Let it be borne in mind, too, that as à Kempis is the *only* candidate for whom a *single* contemporary witness can be cited, so also he is the *sole* one in whose favour any manuscript can be produced which was written either during that candidate's lifetime or shortly after his death.

III.—*Internal Evidence.*

When we come to examine *The Imitation* closely, we find so many internal evidences which point to Thomas à Kempis as the author, that the main difficulty lies in knowing where to commence their description.

In the first place, as regards the style in which the book

is written. It is needless to observe, to those who are familiar with Thomas' works, that *The Imitation* constitutes less than *one-tenth* of the whole. Between it and the rest there is so remarkable a similarity of thought, language, and idiom, that it seems impossible to doubt that all are the product of one mind, and the work of one hand. This point has been developed by many early writers upon the subject, such as Rosweyd, Heser, and Amort; and later authorities, especially Malou, Hirsche, Spitzen, and Becker, have taken great pains to clear it up, and with remarkable success. The works of the four last-named authors are easily accessible to all.

To instance the similarity of thought and choice of subjects Malou gives a list of the parallelisms existing between *The Imitation of Christ* and other works of à Kempis, such as the *Sermons to the Novices*, *The Soliloquy of the Soul*, *The Garden of Roses*, and *Valley of Lilies*. Some years ago I translated à Kempis' *Manuale Parvulorum*, and in the second edition gave a table of the similar passages found in it and in *The Imitation*. These are but selections from the many which might be offered. The opponents of à Kempis will argue that this merely proves his familiarity with *The Imitation;* but such a plea cannot stand. If he quoted *The Imitation* verbatim, it might be said that he copied from it, but was not its author. This he never does. He only develops in his other works the ideas contained in *The Imitation*, but in no instance refers to it. The inference is obvious. Some of à Kempis' adversaries lay stress upon the *supposed* inferiority of his other writings as compared with *The Imitation*. This argument is partly baseless and wholly inapplicable. It would appear that many who rely on it

have not studied his compositions attentively. To those who have done so the conclusion is totally different. Rosweyd, one of the most erudite scholars of his time, profoundly versed in this subject, gives us his opinion in what I hold to be an aphorism. He says, "As a rose has the perfume of a rose, so also *The Imitation of Christ* is like to the other writings of Thomas à Kempis." Alban Butler, the author of *The Lives of the Saints*, unquestionably a very competent judge, denies the asserted inequality of many of the acknowledged works of à Kempis as contrasted with *The Imitation*, and specially instances *The Three Tabernacles* and the treatise *On True Compunction*. To these I might add very many other productions of the holy Canon of Agnetenberg. Coustou, a skilled expert on this point, is of the same opinion. So also is Milman. Last, but certainly not least, I may mention Dr. Carl Hirsche, one of the most learned judges on this subject of modern days. This author, the discoverer of the peculiar punctuation adopted by Thomas both in *The Imitation* and in his other works, after an exhaustive investigation of them all, has arrived at the definite conclusion that he, and he alone, could have been the author of the great book.

Taking this argument at its fullest value, and admitting that some of à Kempis' works do not equal *The Imitation*, I would ask the question,—Are all authors even in their various compositions? Beyond question we must admit they are not. Few would compare St. Augustine's *City of God*, St. Thomas of Aquin's *Summa Theologica*, or St. Francis de Sales' *Introduction to a Devout Life*, with their other works; or, to come to an example in

our own language, no one familiar with the works of John Bunyan would attempt to contrast *The Pilgrim's Progress* with the rest of his productions. In like manner we admit the obvious fact that à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ* is his masterpiece, embodying not alone his own ascetical knowledge, but also the accumulated wisdom of the "School of Windesheim," from which it will be seen he borrowed largely.

While *The Imitation* comprises all the spirituality of the school which Thomas represented, his other works were written, doubtless often comparatively hastily, for different audiences, and more as dissertations on the principles inculcated in his great *chef d'œuvre.* Even so, many of them, I assert confidently, are quite worthy of the author of *The Imitation of Christ.*

We shall next allude to the peculiarities of diction which we find both in *The Imitation of Christ* and in à Kempis' other works. Wonderfully touching and epigrammatic as its language undoubtedly is, no one would venture to hold it up as a model of classical Latinity. On the contrary, it is so manifestly uncouth that attempts have been made, very unsuccessfully, to amend the text. Sebastian Castellio's paraphrase is the most widely known of these efforts. The peculiarities of the original depend greatly on certain unusual elements, including a number of barbarisms, Italianized words, words used in a peculiar sense, and abundant Dutch idioms.

My object in dwelling upon these topics is to impress upon my readers the facts; first, that we find certain very marked singularities in the language of *The Imitation;* secondly, that these same traits appear in all the

other works of à Kempis; and, finally, that from thence we are led to infer that he was the author.

One characteristic of the language of *The Imitation* is the presence of barbarisms. For example, the word *alta* is used to signify *sublime*, *tenere* in place of *aestimare*, *redient* for *redibunt*, *totum* for *omne*, and so on interminably. Now, we find the same rare terms, used in the same sense, throughout à Kempis' other works. To argue that this parallelism is the result of accident is to adopt an utterly untenable position.

Again, the author of *The Imitation* frequently uses Italianized words, such as *regratiari*, *pensare*, *querulando*, *sentimenta*, *bassare*, &c. An attempt has been made to utilize this fact as an argument that the author was an Italian; but if this be true, Thomas à Kempis must have been an Italian, because we find all his writings filled with these words!

We notice the frequent occurrence of the word "devotus" in *The Imitation* and in à Kempis' other works. Despite all cavil, the peculiar sense in which this word is constantly used in designating the members of "The Modern Devotion" is very characteristic, and significant of the common authorship of all the works in question.

I have stated that the language of *The Imitation* partakes largely of a Dutch character, both in conception and idiom. It is needless to observe how important a corroboration this offers in favour of Thomas. A German by birth, while still a boy he came to Holland, where he remained for the rest of his life. Naturally, he came to speak, think, and write as a Dutchman. This peculiarity of the Latinity of *The*

Imitation, while it bears witness in favour of à Kempis, especially when coupled with other evidence, is sufficient to annihilate the claims of Gerson, or of the imaginary Italian Benedictine author. An erudite Frenchman like Gerson could not have written Latin full of Dutch idioms, not one of which is to be found throughout his voluminous writings, and such a feat would have been equally impossible for an Italian. This philological aspect of the subject is one which could not be satisfactorily treated in the present sketch, but I shall give a few illustrations.

The only language into which *The Imitation* can be translated literally is the Dutch. Let us take a few examples of the Flemish idioms which pervade the book from cover to cover. If a Dutchman wishes to say that he knows a book *by heart*, he says, "van buiten," that is, *outside*. Now, we find the author of *The Imitation* turns this phrase into Latin—barbarous no doubt, but a literal translation—as follows:—"Si scires totam Bibliam *exterius*." This expression is untranslatable into French or Italian — it must be rendered by a paraphrase. Again, to express *indifference* in good Dutch, one says, to see a thing with an *even countenance*, "Met een gelijk aengezicht." The author of *The Imitation* translates this phrase literally:—"Ita ut *una aequali facie* in gratiarum actione maneas." This expression, like the foregoing, cannot be translated into French or Italian except by a paraphrase. The same idea of not caring about a thing is expressed in Dutch as *not falling upon it*—"Ik val daer niet op." Now, we find the author of *The Imitation* adopts this precise phrase in the following barbarous Latin:—"Verus amator Christi *non*

cadit super consolationes." Here, again, his words are untranslatable into French or Italian. I might pursue this argument to the extent of filling a volume, but that is at present out of the question.

This appears to be a suitable time to touch upon the literary structure of *The Imitation*, and to note the origin of the book, and the sources from which it is drawn, with a view to indicate its authorship. A lifelong study has led me to the knowledge that it is a compilation, and this we know is the sense in which it is spoken of by Busch and Ryd, two Windesheimers whose evidence I have quoted as knowing à Kempis personally.

First of all, and above all, the book is saturated throughout with the Sacred Scripture. No one can read many sentences in it which do not recall passages in the Old and the New Testament. It reflects them like a mirror, and applies them with unmatched deftness to meet the wants and soul-yearnings of humanity. All this is evident to the many who know the Bible well. Be the quotations direct or paraphrastic, there they are at every step.

Echoes of passages and thoughts of the spiritual writers who preceded it reverberate throughout the wondrous book. The author draws from St. Augustine, from St. Gregory the Great; St. Bernard is evident on most pages; St. Francis of Assisi appears too; likewise St. Thomas of Aquin, St. Bonaventure, and the Roman Missal. He also recalls the Pagan classics, Aristotle, Ovid, Seneca, and Lucian, and we find remarkable coincidence between some passages and Dante.

Still, various as are the sources of *The Imitation*, it becomes manifest, on close investigation, that it is mainly drawn from three fountains.

I shall now allude briefly to these, especially with a view to indicate the probabilities of à Kempis' authorship. These three fountains are:—

First, the Holy Scriptures.

Second, the writings of St. Bernard.

Third, the spiritual works of the school of Windesheim.

(1) As regards the Scriptural lore of *The Imitation*, the edition which first demonstrated this element, in an extended fashion, is that attributed to Cardinal Enriquez, and published in Rome in 1754 and 1755. Many modern editions follow on the same lines, amongst which I may refer to those of Rivington and Parker. This point still needs considerable expansion. Some years ago I worked at it with diligence, and with the result that I verified about three times as many Scriptural allusions as Enriquez.

Let us now see how this Scriptural origin of *The Imitation* favours à Kempis as the author. The Bible in his time, before the invention of printing, was a comparatively rare book, yet we find *all* his works replete with Scripture and the praises thereof, and we know that *he copied out the Old and New Testament in full for the use of his convent*, and was thus of necessity specially familiar with it. His manuscript still exists. It was long missing, but I understand, upon the authority of Father Becker, and Dr. Pohl, Director of the Thomas Gymnasium at Kempen, that it has been found in the Library of the Grand Duke of Darmstadt.

(2) As regards the influence of St. Bernard in the inspiration of *The Imitation*, I was first led to investigate this point by finding in Busch's *Chronicle* record of the fact that St. Bernard's works were greatly esteemed

by the Windesheimers, especially by Gerard Groot and Florentius Radewyn; and further, that Vos van Huesden and the brothers John and Thomas à Kempis had made copious extracts from the writings of the great Abbot of Clairvaux. Thus guided, I studied the works of St. Bernard closely, with the result that I found in them *a singular resemblance in thought to the "Imitation."* I have an edition (Mabillon's) marked to prove this. As an illustration I give in my essay of 1887 (Appendix C) a chapter of *The Imitation*, with the similar passages in St. Bernard. Beyond cavil, this fact confirms the claims of à Kempis, because we have evidence of his special familiarity with St. Bernard.

(3) To conclude the subject of the internal evidence we shall now glance at a very striking and potent argument in favour of the general belief that Thomas à Kempis was the author of *The Imitation*. It is well known that he was the most prolific and representative writer of the "School of Windesheim"; and therefore, assuming that he was the author, we should naturally expect to discover in the book traces of the teaching of that institution. Now this is precisely what we do find. If we place the spiritual works of the Windesheimers side by side with *The Imitation*, we find that the latter reproduces them abundantly, often sentence for sentence, and word for word. From this we are drawn irresistibly to the conclusion that the author of *The Imitation* borrowed copiously from the writings of the "school of Windesheim." What could be more natural than that he, Thomas à Kempis, the leading exponent of that school, should put forth in his great masterpiece the doctrines with which he was so familiar?

The process of tracing the teaching of Windesheim into *The Imitation* was long since commenced, and has been elaborately worked out by Amort, Malou, Santini, Spitzen, and others, and more especially by Becker. For a full exposition of this topic I would refer to the works of the writers named. The limits of this essay allow me to give but a few illustrations. I shall place sentences from the Windesheimers side by side with quotations from *The Imitation* :—

JOHANNES VAN SCHOONHOVEN.	DE IMITATIONE CHRISTI.
In primis ergo scire debes, quod vita nostra in peregrinatione hac *non potest esse sine* periculo et *tentatione*, quia, ut dicit B. *Job*, *militia est vita hominis super terram.*	Quamdiu in mundo vivimus *sine* tribulatione *et tentatione esse non possumus.* Unde in *Job* scriptum est: *Tentatio est vita humana super terram.*
Pax est *in cella*, *foris* autem non nisi bella.	*In cella* invenies quod *deforis* saepius amittes . . . Mane cum eo [Jesu] *in cella*, quia non invenies alibi tantam pacem.
Nemo secure apparet, nisi qui libenter latet. Nemo secure praeest nisi qui libenter subest. Nemo secure loquitur, nisi qui libenter tacet.	*Nemo secure apparet, nisi qui libenter latet. Nemo secure loquitur, nisi qui libenter tacet. Nemo secure praeest nisi qui libenter subest.*
Humilitas, ut dicit S. Bernardus, virtus est, in qua quis in sui verissima cognitione *sibi vilescit.*	*Qui* bene *seipsum* cognoscit, *sibi* ipsi *vilescit.*

GERARDUS GROOT.	DE IMITATIONE CHRISTI.
Semper debes niti aliquod boni notare et cogitare de alio. Quanto plus homo scit se distare a perfectione tam prope est perfectioni.	De se ipso nihil tenere, et de aliis semper bene et alte sentire: magna sapientia est et alta perfectio.
. . . Item, secundum Ber-	Nunquam ad hoc legas ver-

nardum, nullum verbum proferas, de quo multum religiosus vel scientificus appareas.

Maxima tentatio est non tentari.

bum ut doctior aut sapientior possis videri.

Sunt tamen tentationes homini saepe valde utiles, . . . quia in illis homo humiliatur, et purgatur, et eruditur.

FLORENTIUS RADEWYN.

Quam bene vobis est et quam *secure statis*, quod potestis sic vivere sub obedientia.

Semper sis vigilans, *circa tentationem* et motus passionum.

DE IMITATIONE CHRISTI.

Multo *tutius* est *stare* in subjectione quam in praelatura.

Ideo unusquisque sollicitus esse deberet *circa tentationes* suas.

EPISTOLA DE VITA ET PASSIONE DOMINI NOSTRI JESU CHRISTI.

(Used as a spiritual handbook by the Congregation of Windesheim, at the recommendation of Vos van Huesden.)

Ama nesciri et ab aliis contemni opta.

Ante initium operis *propone* qualiter te vis habere.

Qui autem student magis videri subtiles quam esse humiles, et plus quaerunt *scire quam bene vivere*, cito extolluntur et sunt carnales.

. . . quamvis haberet et *sciret omnem Bibliam*, et Scripturam, et Legem unquam positam aut conscriptam, id minime sufficeret.

Qui in tribulatione sunt et angustia, noli negligere eis servire et consolatorius esse.

DE IMITATIONE CHRISTI.

Ama nesciri et pro nihilo reputari.

Bonus et devotus homo opera sua prius intus *disponit* quae foris agere debet.

Quia vero plures magis student scire quam bene vivere, ideo saepe errant et pene nullum, vel modicum fructum ferunt.

Si *scires totam Bibliam* exterius et omnium philosophorum dicta, quid totum tibi prodesset?

Et cum tentato noli duriter agere, sed consolationem ingere.

It seems to me that I have already adduced sufficient evidence in support of the claims of the holy Canon of Mount St. Agnes to satisfy all reasonable people, and to justify my contention and moral certainty, that he was the author of *The Imitation of Christ.* However, before proceeding to discuss the positions of the other two candidates, John Charlier de Gerson, and the so-called Abbot Gersen of Vercelli, I shall briefly recapitulate the proofs I have advanced in favour of à Kempis.

First. We have seen the overwhelming testimony of the witnesses who knew Thomas *personally*, and the wide-spread acknowledgment of his claims during his life, and immediately after his death, especially by those intimate with his associates.

Secondly. The external evidence of the manuscripts in his favour.

Thirdly. The internal evidence of the book itself, its peculiarities of language common to it and the rest of à Kempis' writings; the literary construction of the book itself, and its derivation—from Scripture, St. Bernard, and the writers of Windesheim — with all of which we know he was specially familiar.

Let me here add, that of all the asserted authors of *The Imitation* the only one in whose favour a particle of *internal evidence* can be produced is Thomas à Kempis.

If all these accumulated arguments do not suffice, I am at a loss to know what could do so.

Let us now consider the position of John Charlier de Gerson in reference to the authorship of *The Imitation of Christ.*

If, for a few hours, we imagine ourselves transported back amidst the turbulent scenes which convulsed Central Europe in the early part of the fifteenth century, it will not be difficult to understand how John Charlier de Gerson, the mighty Chancellor of the University of Paris, came to be looked upon as a possible author of *The Imitation of Christ.* He lived near the time when the book appeared; he was a prominent figure in the great religious upheaval of that dark epoch; he was greatly revered—aye, venerated—despite some errors of judgment; and, in addition, he was a versatile and copious writer on spiritual subjects.

While the saintly Canon of Agnetenberg was scarcely known beyond the limits of his own congregation, the world rang with the praise and renown of the "Doctor Christianissimus," who was, in turn, the favourite and the persecuted of princes, the dauntless enemy of heresy and corruption, the guiding spirit of councils—nay, even the deposer of the very Pope himself. Withal, the more deeply we search into his character, history, and writings, the more evident it becomes that *The Imitation* never emanated from his gifted and prolific pen. This great man's life is too well known to need reproduction here—at all events, in any extended form. A page or two will suffice to recapitulate the main features of his magnificent, though sad and troubled career.

John Charlier, otherwise known as John Charlier de Gerson, Johannes Gersonus, Gersone, Jarson, Jarsone, Gersem, or Gersen, was born, on the 14th of December, 1363, at the village of Gerson, near Rheims, from whence he takes his surname. His parents, Arnulph Charlier and Elizabeth de la Chardenière, belonged to a humble

class, were eminently pious, and had the consolation of seeing seven of their twelve children devoting themselves to the service of God in religious life. John, the eldest of the family, was sent to Paris when about fourteen years old. After five years' study in the historic College of Navarre, he obtained the degree of Licentiate in Arts, and then began his theological studies under the direction of Giles des Champs, and Peter D'Ailly, then Chancellor of the University of Paris, and afterwards Bishop of Puy, Archbishop of Cambrai, and Cardinal.

Gerson seems at a very early period to have attracted the notice of the authorities of the University. In 1383 he was elected Procurator, and re-elected the following year. In 1384 he took his degree as Bachelor, and in 1392 as Doctor of Theology. In 1395, when Peter D'Ailly was appointed Bishop of Puy, Gerson, at the early age of thirty-two, was elected Chancellor of the University of Paris, and made Canon of Notre Dame.

This famous University was then in the zenith of its glory, and its Chancellor was of necessity one of the foremost men in Europe, bearing in his hands the destinies of the vast crowd of students from all parts of the world who flocked to its halls and sought its distinctions. Gerson's writings feelingly portray his deep sense of the responsibilities, anxieties, and troubles of his exalted position. Oftentimes he seems to have been weary of the burden. It involved him in perpetual strife, and, being a purely honorary post, in monetary difficulties, and forced him into public life, while he yearned for leisure to pursue his studies. Accordingly, we find him, in 1400, accepting from the Duke of Burgundy, to whom he was almoner, and whose friend-

ship and protection he then enjoyed, the Deanery of the Cathedral of Bruges. This position, with its prospects of comparative independence, does not appear to have suited his aspirations, and within a couple of years he returned to Paris and the Chancellorship of the University. From the time when Gerson left Bruges we find him continuously engaged in strife and contention, endeavouring to promote reformation amongst the clergy and laity, to re-model the course of studies in the University, and absorbed in the struggle to terminate the appalling scandal of his time—the Papal schism—the great schism of the West. He appears as the delegate to Popes and anti-Popes, the leader amongst leaders at Pisa and Constance, swaying the destinies of councils, pontiffs, and of the Church itself.

At last we come to his downfall, wherein his true nobility shines forth. When John Petit essayed to defend the murder of the Duke of Orleans, of which foul deed the reckless Duke of Burgundy, "Jean sans Peur," was avowedly guilty, Gerson, with all the grandeur of his lofty character, sacrificed the favour of his patron, and denounced the false plea set forth to shield him. Again at Constance he returned to the charge, and proved the indefensibility of the murder.

From that hour, through terror of his former potent ally, he became an exile from France, and donning a pilgrim's habit and grasping a staff, he wandered through Lower Germany and Austria, until the tragic death of the Duke of Burgundy permitted his return home.

Disgusted with public life, and unwilling to re-enter its arena, Gerson sought an asylum with his brother,

who was then Prior of the Celestinians at Lyons. There, in peaceful retirement, he spent the remaining years of his life, praying, writing, and teaching little children, asking only from his pupils "a prayer for poor Gerson." He died in 1429, and was buried in the Church of St. Laurence, at Lyons. On his tomb were inscribed the words, "*Pœnitemini et credite Evangelio.*"

Such, in a few sentences, was the history of the mighty Chancellor Gerson, who, despite his errors of judgment, and the terrible vicissitudes of his chequered career, was undoubtedly one of the grandest characters of the Middle Ages. I am aware that many judge him more unfavourably than I can, but the circumstances in which he was placed must be remembered, and due allowance made. It is needless, however, to observe how utterly incompatible the life I have sketched, spent in ceaseless political and polemical warfare, is with the authorship of such a book as *The Imitation*, which throughout exhibits tranquillity, contemplation, and absorption in God—attributes only possible for the work of one who had passed a lifetime in the cloister in meditation and prayer. The bare idea seems absurd, but still it is beyond question that Gerson has been accredited with its paternity, and has found advocates of learning and earnestness.

How came this to pass? As we know, *The Imitation* appeared anonymously in the first third of the fifteenth century. Immediately before that period Gerson was one of the most prominent figures in Europe, and his spiritual writings were spread broadcast and highly appreciated. It so happened, moreover, that in more

than one instance his essay, *De Meditatione Cordis*, was bound up in the same volume with the *Imitatio Christi*.

Herein seems to lie the whole explanation. The obscurity of Thomas à Kempis, the prominence of Gerson, and the ignorance of transcribers, led to *The Imitation*, whose author was little known, being attributed to the Chancellor, whose *Meditatio Cordis* was familiar to many. The error, once promulgated, grew apace as manuscripts were reproduced, and doubtless the exalted reputation of the supposed author caused the book to be read and valued more, and consequently a better investment for the labour of copyists, and later on of printers and publishers. We shall now examine Gerson's claims, show how baseless they are, and contrast them with those of à Kempis. It will be most convenient to discuss them in the order in which we have studied those of the holy Canon of Mount St. Agnes.

I.—*Contemporary Witnesses.*

I have quoted fourteen who bear testimony in favour of à Kempis. For Gerson there is *not a single one.* Nay, more, my reader will recollect that Mauburn, Schott, Lambert, Danhausser, and Simus, while testifying in favour of Thomas, state positively *that Gerson was not the author* of *The Imitation of Christ.*

More crushing even than their statements is the negative evidence of Gerson's brother, and of Jaques de Ciresio, the Chancellor's secretary and intimate friend. John Gerson, the brother and namesake of the Chancellor, with whom the latter spent the closing years of his life, was Prior of the Celestinians at Lyons. In

1423, six years before the death of his illustrious guest, he was requested by a member of his Order, Brother Anselm, to draw up a correct list of Gerson's works. He did so with the utmost precision, but in that catalogue *we do not find "The Imitation" mentioned.* Later on, in 1429, about the time of the Chancellor's death, Ciresio added a note to the catalogue, pointing out the treatises which he admired most, with other details, but of *"The Imitation" he says not one word.*

It is not within the range of possibility that these two men, one the brother, and the other the secretary and devoted friend of the Chancellor, both of whom were responsible for the list of his works, would have omitted to mention *The Imitation* if he were its author. *Their silence is, beyond evasion, a crushing blow to Gerson's pretensions.*

Withal, Gerson has found from time to time, principally amongst his compatriots, learned and brilliant advocates. The most important are Camus, Dupin, Gence, Tourlet, Onésime Leroy, Corneille, Montfaucon, Carton, Thomassy, Vert, and Darche. Of all, Gence is the most erudite and philosophical, and yet the perusal of his remarkable essay leaves the reader under the conviction that this learned writer pleads for an impossible theory.

The most recent champions of the great Chancellor are Vert and Darche. Certainly they have availed themselves to the utmost of the researches of their predecessors, so we need not travel beyond their writings. If deficient in solid argument, unquestionably they are not wanting in vivacity of imagination or boldness of assertion. As a specimen of M. Vert's

method of reasoning, let us see what he says of "contemporary witnesses" for the claims of Gerson. He tells us that numbers are forthcoming. As a matter of fact, what do his "contemporary witnesses" amount to?

First. Louis Gonzales (who lived about a century and a half after the death of Gerson) says that St. Ignatius of Loyola always carried with him his "Gerson," or *Imitation of Christ.*

Secondly. A Memoir, edited by the Jesuits about 1570 (one hundred and forty years after Gerson's death), points out as a work greatly prized by the Society of Jesus, *The Imitation of Christ*, attributing it to Gerson.

Thirdly. He quotes Luca Pinelli, an Italian Jesuit, whose works appeared about the year 1600—that is, one hundred and seventy years after Gerson's death—who also attributes *The Imitation* to Gerson.

Such are Vert's *numerous contemporary witnesses!*

I think it would scarcely repay the reader if I were to carry him in detail through the mazes of M. Vert's arguments, the cogency of which may be fairly gauged by the foregoing specimens.

Respecting M. Darche's strange essay, I find it difficult to offer an opinion. It appears to be the rhapsody of an enthusiast, and his contentions, reduced to a point, amount to this, that Gerson was a great and good man, an eminent spiritual writer, and therefore must have been the author of *The Imitation!*

II.—*External Evidence of Manuscripts.*

The earliest dated manuscript of *The Imitation* which attributes it to Gerson is the Sangermanensis. It is *signed 1460,* thirty-one years after the death of

posed author. The Florentine manuscripts of 1464 and 1466 give his name as John Gers*en*, Parisian Chancellor. So also do the Verona and the Wolfenbuttel. The Padolironensis codex also gives his name as Gers*en*, and his epitaph.

This fact should be carefully borne in mind, as we shall see its importance later on—viz., that the name of the Parisian Chancellor is frequently written Gers*en*. As to the undated manuscripts bearing Gerson's name (howsoever spelt), there is not one which shows evidence of being written earlier than the fifteenth century, and not the earliest portion of it. I need not dilate upon this topic. We have already discussed the value of the undated manuscripts. Adding together the various codices which give the name of Gerson, Gersem, Gersen, Gers, &c.—all of which evidently point to the Chancellor of Paris—we find that they amount to about thirty.

When we call to mind these facts, we are in a position to estimate the vast preponderating external evidence of manuscripts in favour of à Kempis and against Gerson. While the great Chancellor was one of the most prominent characters of his day, and a well-known and prolific spiritual writer, we find some thirty manuscripts giving his name, but not one during his life, or for over thirty years after his death. On the other hand, in favour of the obscure Monk of Agnetenberg, who was scarcely known outside of his Congregation, we find some sixty manuscripts pointing to him, a considerable proportion written during his life, including one in his own handwriting, placed at the head of a series of spiritual treatises which we have no reason to doubt were of his own composition.

Furthermore, as we have seen, the larger portion of the three hundred and sixty-one manuscripts appertaining to Germany and the Low Countries exhibit contact and amity with the School of Windesheim, of which à Kempis was the great literary exponent.

Before leaving the subject of the manuscripts advanced in favour of Gerson, I must allude to the theory raised by the Abbé Dufresnoy, and defended by Onésime Leroy, and later by Vert.

There exists in the library of Valenciennes a manuscript, in French, containing some works of Gerson, to which his name is appended, and also the three first books of *The Imitation of Christ*, under the title of *L'Internelle Consolation*, to which no name is attached. Some partizans of Gerson, including several of those named above, argue that the book of *L'Internelle Consolation* is by Gerson, and that he wrote it in French. Their contention does not bear examination. The Valenciennes manuscript is dated 1462, and is almost identical with another manuscript existing in the library of Amiens, dated 1447, which the transcriber *avows to be a translation from Latin into French.* There is good evidence, moreover, to show that both manuscripts are attributable to the same individual—namely, David Aubert, a native of Hesdin.

Now, as the earliest of these manuscripts dates eighteen years subsequent to the death of Gerson, and the other no less than thirty-three years after that event, it seems futile to contend that they assist his candidature. Monseigneur Malou discusses this subject with great care, and demonstrates satisfactorily that the manuscripts in question are a very clumsy translation of *The Imitation*,

which, as we know, was extant in Latin thirty-six years before the date of the earliest of them.

III.—*Internal Evidence.*

When we examine *The Imitation of Christ* and the works of John Gerson, with a view to discovering a similarity between the two, we find instead a diametrical opposition. We have already seen the remarkable parallelism which exists between *The Imitation* and the works of Thomas à Kempis—in style, peculiarities of language, including unusual words, Dutch idioms, unique punctuation, derivation from the Scriptures, St. Bernard, and the writers of the School of Windesheim. When, on the other hand, we study the works of the great Chancellor, we are struck by a manifest contrast in every particular. In vain do we seek for the peculiarities of language and train of thought which characterise *The Imitation* and à Kempis' other compositions. They are nowhere to be found. Gerson is decidedly scholastic—*The Imitation* is the very reverse. Gerson is diffuse, verbose, involved—*The Imitation* is terse, epigrammatic, and transparently clear. Gerson is grandiloquent, didactic, arid, and but rarely devotional—*The Imitation* is homely, sympathetic, and full of unction at every page. Gerson deals mostly with theory and reason—*The Imitation* is always practical, and appeals to the heart.

If we take the *Meditatio Cordis* as a specimen of Gerson's spiritual teaching, and read it side by side with *The Imitation*, it becomes evident that the two never emanated from the same source. I quote this particular essay because its subject is somewhat congenial, and thus it affords a fair ground for comparison.

This striking diversity of style constitutes an argument against the great Chancellor which is *per se* conclusive and unanswerable. Authors vary in the power and merit of their compositions, but style is an individuality and unalterable. Gerson's style asserts itself throughout his works as consistently as à Kempis' pervades *The Imitation* and his other writings, and no wider contrast could be imagined than what we find between the productions of these two great teachers. It would seem to me as reasonable to attribute *The Pilgrim's Progress* to Gibbon, or the *Dialogues of Lucian* to Xenophon, as to affirm that *The Imitation* was the work of the Chancellor of Paris.

Cardinal Newman touches this subject with his well-known perspicuity and force. Speaking of the individuality with which every man of genius expresses his ideas and feelings in language, he says—" . . . he gives utterance to them all,—in a corresponding language, which is as multiform as this inward mental action itself, and analogous to it, the faithful expression of his intense personality, attending on his own inward world of thought as its very shadow ; so that we might as well say that one man's shadow was another's, as that the style of a really gifted mind can belong to any but himself. It follows him about *as* a shadow. His thought and feeling are personal, and so his language is personal. Thought and speech are inseparable from each other. Matter and expression are parts of one : style is a thinking out into language."

After studying the works of Gerson it appears to me that his partisans have quite overlooked the philological *aspect of the* question. The supposition that he was the

author of *The Imitation* must include a belief that he had learned a *new language* in which to write it, *totally different* from what we find in his voluminous and admirable works!

It seems needless to discuss further the idea that the great Chancellor Gerson could have written *The Imitation;* however, before dismissing the subject, I would refer all interested in it to the remarkably clear and solid refutation of his pretensions which we find in the essays of two recent French writers—namely M. Arthur Loth, and Monseigneur Puyol.

In conclusion, let me quote a remark lately made to me by one of the most erudite Frenchmen of our time, M. Leopold Delisle, Director of the National Library in Paris, viz. :—"For the learned, who have studied and understand this subject, the controversy is at an end, and in favour of Thomas à Kempis."

The third candidate for the authorship of *The Imitation of Christ*, whose pretensions we must discuss is John Gersen, a supposed Benedictine abbot of Vercelli, who is stated to have lived, and, moreover, to have written the book, in the first half of the thirteenth century.

Hitherto we have dealt with individuals about whose existence there can be no doubt. Thomas à Kempis and John Charlier de Gerson were realities beyond question; and whatever may have been their relation to *The Imitation*, no one can deny that they lived and did great work in the field of spiritual literature. This much cannot be averred of John Gersen. He is neither more nor less than a phantom. His first appearance before

the world dates from the beginning of the seventeenth century (some four hundred years subsequent to his supposed existence), and came to pass after this fashion :—

In the year 1604, in a house of the Jesuits at Arona, on the Lago Maggiore, Father Bernard Rossignoli, S.J., found an undated manuscript of *The Imitation of Christ.* This was the famous Arona Codex. At the end of the fourth book is written : "Explicet liber quartus et ultimus Abbatis Johannis Gersen de sacramento altaris." In other portions of the manuscript the author is named Gessen or Geshen once (the name being here very difficult to decipher), and Gessen thrice. As this house of the Jesuits had formerly been a monastery of the Benedictines, Father Rossignoli imagined that the book belonged to their library, and leaped to the conclusion that it originated with that great Order. Very precipitately, as subsequent events proved, he put forward the Codex as such, and thus gave origin to a most extraordinary fable.

In the year 1617 Father Majoli, another Jesuit who had made his noviceship at Arona, hearing the story, came forward, and made *a declaration* to the effect that it was he who had brought the Codex to Arona from his paternal home in Genoa ! Thus Father Rossignoli's idea was proved to be a mistake. However, Majoli's avowal came too late to prevent an absurd and vexatious controversy. The manuscript had fallen into the hands of Constantine Cajetan, an enthusiastic Benedictine, who, in his anxiety to add to the abundant laurels of his Order the paternity of the great treasure, actually published it in Rome in 1616, asserting that it was the work of "the Venerable John Gessen, a Benedictine Abbot." *In a second* edition, brought out in 1618, he re-baptized

the imaginary author as "John Gersen," which appellation has survived to the present day.

It was useless to argue that Gersen was a common mode, as we have seen, of writing the name of Gerson, the Parisian Chancellor—that it was quite natural to style him "abbot," as he was actually *Abbé commendataire* of St. Jean-en-Grève;—the new interpretation suited the novel craze, and must be worked out to the bitter end. Without disparaging Cajetan we may truthfully say that he carried his enthusiasm to folly, as may be seen by the facts related concerning him by Malou and others. At all events, the new candidate was launched upon the world, and all the powers of the great Order of St. Benedict were put forward in the attempt to substantiate his claim. Immediately on the appearance of Cajetan's edition of *The Imitation*, Heribert Rosweyd, a learned Belgian Jesuit, took up the challenge, and published his *Vindiciae Kempenses*, which remains to this day one of the ablest essays ever written on the subject, and a model for controversialists. It had no effect, however, on the enthusiastic sponsor of the imaginary John Gersen.

As no one had ever heard before of such an individual as the new candidate, it became necessary to give him a habitation, a country, a birthplace—aye, and even a portrait. All this was done by a series of processes indicating more fertile imagination than historical truth.

A copy of *The Imitation*, printed in Venice and dated 1501, gave the needful clue. Upon this volume some unknown writer had traced the following note:—"Hunc librum non compilavit Johannes Gerson, sed D. Johannes . . . Abbas Vercellensis . . . ut habetur

usque hodie propria manu scriptus in eadem abbatia." This was enough for Cajetan. John Gersen, as a matter of course, was Abbot of Vercelli, and an Italian! It mattered nothing that the name of the asserted Vercellese author was not given; moreover, the fact was overlooked that this written note is undoubtedly falsified, as Delfau and Naudé declare. The idea fitted Cajetan's wishes, and therefore must be true.

By and by it became necessary to find a birthplace for Gersen. That was promptly done. A manuscript of *The Imitation* (the Allacianus), which attributes the book to John Tambaco, a learned Dominican of the fourteenth century, answered this want perfectly. Tambaco, misread by confusion between the letters T and C, gave the author as John Cambaco, or Canabaco, and this word, by a process wholly unknown to philology, was metamorphosed into Cavaglia, a village near Vercelli, in which Gersen was stated to have been born!

The next step necessary was to provide a portrait of the newly-discovered hero. This likewise was accomplished without delay. The so-called *Codex Cavensis* has a picture of a monk painted within the letter Q at the commencement of the first sentence, *Qui Sequitur me*. This picture is stated by the Gersenists to represent a Benedictine monk—no other than John Gersen! They ignored the circumstance that this manuscript bears neither name nor date, and that there is strong evidence that it never belonged to the Benedictine Monastery of La Cava, in the kingdom of Naples. In 1833 an enthusiastic Gersenist, the Chevalier de Grégory, enlarged the picture and placed it as a frontispiece to his work.

Let us here recapitulate. By Father Rossignoli's

proven error in supposing that the Arona Codex ever belonged to the Benedictine library at Arona; by the blunder of a copyist so ill informed that he spells the supposed author's name in three different ways, and called him Abbot; and by the vivid imagination of Dom Cajetan;—we have the new candidate put forward as the Venerable John Gersen, Abbot of the Benedictine Order. By a falsified and utterly worthless note in the Venice edition we find him represented as an Abbot of Vercelli, and therefore an Italian; by a misreading of the name of John Tambaco we find him born at Cavaglia; and, finally, by a *coup de main* of extravagant fancy, we have his portrait manufactured out of the illuminated Q in the so-called *Codex Cavensis!*

Verily, what more could be needed to prove Gersen's existence, and claim to the authorship of *The Imitation of Christ!*

Still, we must follow Cajetan's eccentricities a little further. The question will be asked, When did Gersen flourish as Abbot of Vercelli? Probably with the idea of ante-dating *The Imitation of Christ*, so as to put Thomas à Kempis and John Charlier de Gerson out of the field, the new candidate was asserted to belong to the thirteenth century. Most certainly the Arona manuscript (which I have myself most carefully examined) never justified such an assumption, all competent authorities referring it to the fifteenth century. However, careful search was made, which proved that in neither of the monasteries of Vercelli—St. Andrew's, belonging to the Canons Regular, and St. Stephen's, the Benedictine Convent—was there any record of an abbot of the name of John Gersen. All this made no matter,

Dom Cajetan and a host of Benedictines held to the myth—the Augustinian Canons Regular could not abandon the just and solid claims of Thomas à Kempis. Accordingly two powerful Orders entered the lists, partisans joined the fray on both sides, the *mêlée* became European, and thus was inaugurated the most extraordinary controversy known in the history of literature. In process of time, popes, cardinals, bishops, priests, and laymen, of various nationalities, were drawn into the battle. Congresses were held, and various decisions arrived at. The Congregation of the Index, and even the Parliament of Paris were appealed to, and many bitter personal quarrels arose. Still, while partisans and theorists lived and died, the truth gradually rose to the surface.

It would be an unwarrantable trespass on my reader's patience to follow all the intricacies of this contest, which lasted nearly three hundred years, or to analyze what each combatant asserted or refuted; and it would be very painful to rake up all the bitterness and obliquity to which it has occasionally given rise.

The Kempists, from the days of the witty Amort up to the present, seem unable to resist the ludicrous view of the contention. Withal, levity is out of place in the discussion of an historical problem, although, if ever excusable, it certainly would be so in the present instance.

For my own part, I have only to observe, that, having made a special study of the question for a good part of my life, and having conscientiously sought out all the information procurable, at home and abroad, I have been drawn to the conclusion that there is not the

faintest scintilla of evidence that such a personage as John Gersen, of Vercelli, ever existed. In other words, I am perfectly satisfied that he is neither more nor less than a phantom.

Having discussed at considerable length, in my essay of 1887, all that Gersen's advocates have advanced, I hesitate to do more than allude—very briefly—to the efforts they make in his favour.

I have already explained how he was invented by Dom Cajetan, and every step in that truly absurd process. Amongst the few latter-day partisans of the imaginary John Gersen, of Vercelli, we find the Chevalier De Grégory, the Père Mella, S.J., Dom Wolfsgruber, and Monseigneur Puyol. I will offer a few observations concerning each of these writers, and for the rest, refer all interested in the subject—and with time at their disposal—to my original essay.

De Grégory appears from his works to have been an excellent Vercellese gentleman, no doubt imbued with good motives, filled with extravagant enthusiasm, of transparent simplicity, totally innocent of logic or historical acumen, and gifted with a very rare power of confusion.

The earlier part of his life appears to have been devoted to a search amongst manuscripts of *The Imitation* for one to prove the existence of John Gersen. The result was a ludicrous failure. He gives a list of authorities in favour of the existence of his hero. The majority are unknown, and no reference is given to their works. This is a facile short cut out of his difficulty. Those he does name are actually *adverse* to his argument.

The latter portion of De Grégory's life was devoted to a different, but equally unsuccessful, mode of supporting the cause of Gersen. I shall briefly relate it. In the year 1830 he purchased from Techener, a bookseller in Paris, a manuscript of *The Imitation of Christ*, which was believed to have come from Italy. No sooner had he possessed himself of this treasure than he examined it closely, and being totally unskilled in paleography assigned it to the thirteenth century.

Inside the volume he discovered the names of its former owners. Beginning with the date of 1550, was a list of various members of a family known by the appellation "Avogadro"; in Latin "De Advocatis." Now, it so happened that a noble family of that name still lived at Biella, near Vercelli. Here was a discovery; or, at all events, a foundation upon which to build a castle in the air! De Grégory lost no time in making known his good fortune, and communicating with the Avogadro family. Shortly afterwards, most marvellous to relate, a fragment of a diary was exhumed from amongst the archives of the said family, dated between 1345 and 1349, in which a certain Joseph De Advocatis makes allusion to a precious codex of *The Imitation of Christ*, which he avers was in the possession of his ancestors long before the time at which he wrote.

Led astray by a mass of fantasies, De Grégory now formulated and published his conclusions—

First. That his manuscript, the *Codex De Advocatis*, dated from the thirteenth century;

Secondly. That the diary, thenceforth known as the *Diarium De Advocatis*, referred to that Codex; and,

Thirdly. That all this (supposed) evidence favoured the cause of John Gersen.

At first, the real facts being unknown and unsuspected, De Grégory succeeded in making several converts to his views, especially in Italy; but by and by inexorable truth penetrated the mists of delusion, and the worthy Chevalier's castle vanished into thin air.

First. Critical examination proved that the newly-discovered manuscript of *The Imitation* really belonged to the fifteenth, and not the thirteenth century; and

Secondly. That the *Diarium* was a clumsy forgery.

Apart from these extraordinary deceptions, to which the Chevalier undoubtedly fell an innocent victim, it seems strange that any sane person should have attempted to erect from such a foundation any support for the pretensions of John Gersen. The *Codex de Advocatis* and the *Diarium* make no mention whatsoever of Gersen, and De Grégory ought to have known that there never was a particle of evidence to connect that mythical personage with Vercelli.

If, for the sake of argument, we were to concede what we know to be untrue—namely, that the *Codex de Advocatis* dated from the thirteenth century, and that the *Diarium* was a genuine document, De Grégory's defence of Gersen, derived from these premisses, would resolve itself into the following argument:—

First. The *Codex de Advocatis* dates from the thirteenth century.

Secondly. The *Diarium* alludes to that particular Codex.

Thirdly. Therefore John Gersen was the author!

Verily, if this is a specimen of De Grégory's logic, he

was not a close reasoner. When, on the other hand, we grasp the real facts—namely, that the *Codex de Advocatis* is a fifteenth-century document, and the *Diarium* a forgery, then indeed we realize how utterly the Chevalier was himself deceived, and in turn misled those who accepted his opinions. So much for De Grégory. No one can read his works without arriving at the conclusion that what he considers facts are fables, that his conjectures are wild, and his conclusions untenable.

Mella and Wolfsgruber follow a line so similar—in fact, identical—that they differ only in the language in which they write. What may be affirmed of one applies in the main to the other. Wolfsgruber's essay can best be described as a romance, charming reading for any one totally ignorant of the subject, but deficient in any solid basis. Like Mella, he adopts the method of boldly stating his case—very attractively, I admit—and of ignoring or minimizing all that can be brought against him.

First, he gives an imaginary life of the supposed Abbot, including his birthplace, details of his early education, his friendships, and of course his works, including *The Imitation of Christ.* For all this there is not one particle of foundation! Wolfsgruber's story, like many others, is quite credible until the other side is heard. Then it crumbles to dust—nay, more—the wonder begins to grow that any one could write as he does unless satisfied that his assertions could be verified. When the reader seeks for proofs he discovers that none exist.

Apart from the romantic element already alluded to,

Wolfsgruber's work, like Mella's, consists of a *réchauffé* of the usual exploded theories of the Gersenists—namely, the manuscripts asserted to be older than à Kempis,—the famous *Diarium de Advocatis*,—the imagined quotations from writers of the thirteenth century,—the Paulanus codex,—and so on. It may be said of it, that what is new is not true, and what is true is not new.

Probably the best comment I can make upon Wolfsgruber's *Life and Work of John Gersen* is to record its effect upon a learned critic, the late Père Schneemann, S.J., who at the time he studied it inclined to the side of Gersen, and had actually written in his favour. The result of his examination of this essay was to shake his former belief so completely that he investigated the question anew, and became an avowed and ardent Kempist. I shall translate his words:—

"Formerly I defended the rights of Gersen, and I believed them to be indisputable; I then took in hand, with the greatest interest, Wolfsgruber's plea for Gersen, believing that I should find therein arguments for my own justification. I was then in the most favourable dispositions regarding Gersen; but, after having studied this work profoundly, I began to doubt, and the rights of Gersen did not appear to me so certain. The more I examined the question in all its aspects, the more I felt myself led to believe that Thomas à Kempis had in reality written *The Imitation*."

Subsequently, Schneemann contributed a remarkable article in favour of Thomas à Kempis.

Since the publication of his work on John Gersen Dom Wolfsgruber has edited a pamphlet, entitled *Septem Motiva contra Thomam de Kempis*. Monseigneur Puyol also quotes this essay, the manuscript

of which is to be found in the National Library in Paris. The document is a remarkable specimen of feebleness and confusion, and it is not easy to understand why Wolfsgruber and Puyol avail themselves of it, as it is certainly anti-Gersenist, and a very weak attempt to dispute the claims of the great monk of Mount St. Agnes.

I am bound to confess myself indebted to Dom Wolfsgruber for my determination to examine the Paulanus manuscript, upon which he lays considerable stress. As I have already shown this manuscript is worthless, its dates being forged; and I pointed out this to Dom Wolfsgruber when I had the pleasure of making his acquaintance in Vienna, in the autumn of 1889. He had no reply to make.

Leaving De Grégory, Mella, and Wolfsgruber, we come to the most recent defender of the Gersenist fantasy—namely, Monseigneur Puyol. This erudite writer approaches the subject in a more scholarly fashion than his predecessors, discusses its points with ingenuity and at prodigious length; but his arguments are shallow and his conclusions untenable. Assuming that this learned divine, in his elaborate treatise on *The Imitation of Christ*, has availed himself of all the learning that has ever been brought forward in favour of Gersen, I have read and re-read with close attention his ponderous octavo of five hundred and thirty pages. If not luminous, Puyol is certainly voluminous. I am obliged to add that I cannot find in anything or in all that he brings forward the smallest ground for accepting his opinions.

At first he endeavours to show a Benedictine origin

of *The Imitation*, and therein totally fails. Then he seeks to depreciate à Kempis, and to represent him as incapable of the authorship of the great book. Here, again, forgetting or unconscious of the opposite demonstration of Rosweyd, Amort, Coustou, and many others, whose knowledge on this point far exceeds his own, he collapses most ignominiously. Lastly, he seeks to represent *The Imitation* as an outcome of the spiritual school of Italy in the thirteenth century. The more we examine this theory the more visionary it becomes, until it finally vanishes; and we are thrown back upon the obvious fact, that the inspiration of the book, its phraseology and idioms, can only be found in the school of Windesheim. As an exercise of patience I can strongly recommend Monseigneur Puyol's work to all who have abundant leisure at their disposal.

So much for Gersen and his partizans. Naturally some extravagant developments of Gersenism have taken place; but that was to be expected, remembering the absurdity of the process by which this phantom was invented. Amongst others, we find that in 1874 a statue was erected in the parish church of Cavaglia in honour of Gersen, and that in 1884 another similar memorial was unveiled at Vercelli. The latter ceremony gave occasion to the Archbishop of Turin, Cardinal Alimonda, to deliver an eloquent address, wherein he declares John Gersen to be the author of *The Imitation of Christ!*

What, may I ask, do these statues prove?—The inextinguishable vigour of imagination. Gersen was the creation of Cajetan's fancy, as Minerva was of Jupiter's brain; but, as Father Becker quaintly observes, Italy

is full of statues of Minerva, yet who would argue from thence that such a being ever existed?

May I suggest to his Eminence, and to his hearers and readers, the perusal of a notice of this discourse from the pen of the Chanoine Delvigne, of Brussels? With all the dignity, self-restraint, and scholarly perspicuity which characterize this learned writer, he exposes, most respectfully, but scathingly, the startling indiscretion of such a pronouncement, coming from so high a dignitary, and from so privileged a ground as the pulpit of a cathedral.

So much for John Gersen, of Vercelli. I have endeavoured to discuss his candidature with becoming gravity, although often sorely tempted in the opposite direction.

Having now disposed of Gersen and his advocates, I will add, before concluding, a few observations concerning those opponents of Thomas à Kempis who are unable to suggest an author for *The Imitation*, but still revel in vain wandering and crotchets.

We have already seen something of the essay, *Septem motiva contra Thomam de Kempis.* The author is unknown, and so much the better.

Some thirty-six years ago an ingenious and learned author, M. Phillippe Tamizey de Larroque, wrote some articles with the intention of showing that the internal evidence of style, &c., in *The Imitation*, and in the admitted works of Thomas à Kempis, tends to discredit the claims of the pious Canon Regular of Mount St. Agnes.

I have not found in these clever essays anything to satisfy me that the author is justified in his conclusions,

and, on the other hand, I have observed some errors which appear unaccountable. I shall say nothing of his style, except that, despite its attractions, it is strikingly deficient in judicial calm. M. de Larroque argues against à Kempis on the ground that his acknowledged works contain certain words and expressions not found in *The Imitation*, and *vice versâ*. Furthermore, that he treats some subjects rather (but not substantially) differently from the author of *The Imitation*. The discrepancies insisted upon by M. de Larroque appear to me trifling, and altogether insufficient to support his contention, unless, indeed, we were to grant what is not alone against probability and experience, but even impossible—namely, that a given voluminous author like à Kempis, who beyond doubt was in addition a diligent compiler, must of necessity repeat himself in thought, word, and expression in all his works, and maintain the same level of merit, irrespective of the subject in hand and the audience to which he addresses himself.

M. de Larroque falls into some strange errors, of which I shall single out one for illustration. He reminds us that à Kempis loved rhyming, and that the author of *The Imitation* did not, and therefore that Thomas could not have been the author. This is a fundamental mistake, very curious for a diligent reader, but excusable to some extent, because M. de Larroque wrote in 1861, and Dr. Hirsche did not publish his researches on the rhythm and rhyme of *The Imitation* until 1873. As a matter of fact, the rhythm and rhyme of *The Imitation*, so identical with what we find in à Kempis' other works, constitute a most important proof that Thomas *was* the author.

M. de Larroque concludes his essays by some curious speculations as to the personality of the real author. He rejects à Kempis—likewise Gersen, with emphasis, and is altogether doubtful about Gerson. But he hazards as far-fetched a solution of the problem as I have yet encountered. He tells us that the love of the French for the book points to France as the country of its origin—"la prédilection d'une mère pour son enfant!" Had our author investigated the internal evidence derived from the study of the linguistic peculiarities of *The Imitation*—a point which he declines to enter upon—I believe he would never have arrived at this conclusion. I hope that when he masters the whole evidence now before us, to a vast amount of which he does not even allude, and much of which has come to light since he wrote, he will arrive at a very different opinion respecting the claims of the saintly Canon of Mount St. Agnes.

Another of the theorists who oppose à Kempis is M. Arthur Loth, of Paris. He holds that *The Imitation* was probably written by a member of the Congregation of Windesheim prior to the time of Thomas, and he has placed his views before the public in a series of articles in the *Revue des Questions Historiques*, which occupy about one hundred and fifty pages octavo. His conclusions are founded upon a certain manuscript which he discovered some years ago in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, in which the first book of *The Imitation*, and fragments of the third and fourth, are found bound up with several treatises on spiritual and other subjects. At the commencement of this collection is a calendar, which, according to Loth, points to the

year 1406. Upon this very sandy foundation he builds up the theory that *The Imitation of Christ* was written before 1406, and that therefore Thomas could not have been its author, as he was only twenty-six years of age at that time.

A very short study suffices to upset this doctrine. Assuming for the sake of brevity that M. Loth is correct in believing that the calendar dates back to 1406—a very questionable point indeed—we have yet to learn at what period it and the other treatises in the volume, including the portions of *The Imitation*, were bound up together. On this point we have no indication whatsoever, and hence these fragments of *The Imitation* may just as well date fifty years later than the supposed calendar of 1406. The binding of the MS. is quite modern.

Again, M. Loth endeavours to strengthen his assumption as to the date of *The Imitation of Christ* by dwelling on the fact that there are marginal notes in the manuscript which allude to it as the *De Imitatione Christi*—a term not applied to it in its earliest days. Here I am obliged to remark that I believe he is not a careful observer. In June, 1884, I examined this manuscript myself, and I am certain that the aforesaid marginal notes *are not written in the same handwriting or ink as the rest of the manuscript.* Thus the conclusion based on these notes goes for nothing, as they may have been written fifty or a hundred years later than the manuscript.

Finally, in his third article, M. Loth commits himself to an assertion which shows much want of care in the examination of the documents respecting which he writes. He gives a description of a manuscript, then the

property of Count Riant, in which, among other treatises, is found the first book of *The Imitation of Christ.* Further on is a work of Floretus, bearing date 1416. Loth describes the manuscript as homogeneous —that is, written by one hand—and argues from thence that *The Imitation of Christ* was known before 1416.

I have no intention of disputing the fact that the first book of *The Imitation* was extant at that period, when Thomas à Kempis was already thirty-six years of age—on the contrary, I fully believe it; but Loth's assertion that Count Riant's manuscript is homogeneous is positively erroneous. In September, 1885, M. Ruelens showed me photographs taken from different parts of this codex which prove beyond doubt that it was written by *several* copyists. Here, again, we find our author building on an unstable base a structure which falls to the ground. In short, a critical examination of M. Loth's elaborate articles forces us to the conclusion that, despite his great ingenuity, high literary ability, and very attractive style, his theories are unfounded, and his conclusions erroneous.

I think it is now time for me to bring this discussion to a close, and I believe every one guided by the ordinary rules of evidence will concede that I have answered the question with which I began, namely—"Who was the author of *The Imitation of Christ?*"

Of course this essay has been very brief, and intended mainly to give a bird's-eye view of the subject, as a guide for others who may wish to enter upon a more extended and profound study of it. For all the authorities I must refer to my essay of 1887. They would have been quite out of place in the present little sketch.

I have told briefly the story of the appearance of the great book, of the spiritual school from which it emanated, of the great monk Thomas à Kempis, in whose favour as its author we find a crushing mass of evidence —traditional—contemporaneous—external and internal. I have shown that the mighty Chancellor Gerson was not its author; that the so-called John Gersen, of Vercelli, is a myth; and that the hypotheses of those theorists, who oppose à Kempis, although unable to suggest any other author, are baseless, and full of mistakes, and erroneous statements.

To conclude, I offer, on the following page, a tabular summary of the real state of the case, and leave the rest to the judgment of my readers.

THOMAS À KEMPIS. (Born 1379 or 1380 ; died 1471.)	JOHN CHARLIER DE GERSON. (Born 1363 ; died 1429.)	JOHN GERSEN, Benedictine Abbot of Vercelli.	HYPOTHESES Of the author of the *Septem Motiva*, of de Larroque and Loth.
I. *Contemporary Witnesses.* From amongst a crowd I have quoted fourteen, of whom two knew him personally, and three were members of his own order, and therefore representatives of the domestic tradition which attributed the authorship to à Kempis long before any controversy arose.	I. *Contemporary Witnesses.* Not one to be found in his favour. Two (his brother and Ciresio) *negatively* adverse by their silence. Five, shortly after his time, testify *positively* against him.	Existence wholly mythical. Claims to the authorship of *The Imitation* unsustained by one particle of evidence.	Purely speculative, and full of obvious mistakes and erroneous statements.
II. *External Evidence of Manuscripts.* A large portion of the most ancient and trustworthy manuscripts, many dating during his life, and one in his own handwriting, point to him as the author.	II. *External Evidence of Manuscripts.* Not a single manuscript dated during his life, or for thirty years after his death, assigns the authorship to him.		
III. *Internal Evidence.* In favour of à Kempis we find— (1) Identity of Style ; including peculiarities, viz.— (*a*) Barbarisms. (*b*) Italianized words. (*c*) The word "Devotus" used in a peculiar sense. (*d*) Dutch idioms. (*e*) Systematic rhythmical punctuation. — Common to *The Imitation* and other works of à Kempis. (2) *The Imitation*, in part derived, word for word, from the writings of the "School of Windesheim," of which à Kempis was the leading exponent. (3) Also copiously derived from the Scripture, and the works of St. Bernard, with both of which we know à Kempis was *specially* familiar.	III. *Internal Evidence.* Unfavourable to him in every point.		

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